

*"The greatest exponent of the most fascinating
and difficult detective story is indisputably
John Dickson Carr." — Howard Haycraft*

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PANIC IN BOX C



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1 JOURNEY

NIGHT HAD deepened with a whoop and roar. Sleet whistled across open decks and stung the glass of enclosed ones as R M S *Illyria*, westbound for New York, shouldered down against the battering of the Atlantic in January. Yet it was not very heavy weather, and the liner had been fitted with stabilizers. *Illyria*, sister-ship to *Sylvania* and exactly like her except that *Illyria's* home port was Southampton instead of Liverpool, pitched to the long swell but hardly rolled at all.

In the first-class smoking room, forward on the Promenade Deck, a creaking ran across bulkheads brown-panelled with shields depicting badges belonging to various regiments of the British Army. It was the drowsy post-dinner hour. In the lounge, separated from the smoking room by the foyer with the liner's main staircase, they were beginning a session at bingo under the supervision of the assistant purser; it would be followed presently by unenthusiastic dancing to Jimmy Somebody, and his Music.

The smoking room, all deep brown-leather armchairs and little red-topped tables, could not be called hilarious either. Nat, the shrivelled little barman with the white hair and sinister-looking black eyebrows, leaned negligently behind his counter. Georgie, the steward, stood beside it half asleep. Only two passengers were having a drink at this hour. Philip Knox, glass in hand, paced slowly between his table and the left-hand door to the foyer, steadying his legs against the ship's motion, and pondered the mission that was taking him to America. Spare-built, good-natured, not undistinguished in appearance, he had become a popular historian of some note. Philip Knox was fifty-four years old. But he had kept his hair, his waistline, his sense of humour, and his interest in life; he did not often wish himself younger. As for his mission in America, this equally failed to trouble him: he had an easy manner, a good speaking voice, and much fluency.

'Heigh-ho!' he said to himself, letting it go at that.

Throned in the largest armchair,' wheezing and chuckling through all twenty-odd stone of him, sat Knox's old friend Dr Gideon Fell.

Dr Fell's eyeglasses with the black ribbon were stuck skew-whiff on his nose, and glittered against a red face. His bandit's moustache had a kind of benevolent bristle. Chuckles animated his several chins and ran down the ridges of his waistcoat. Very untidily dressed, his crutch-handled stick propped beside him, he was wedged there in vastness like Father Christmas or Old King Cole, with a lighted cigar in one hand and a tall glass in the other.

'Heh!' he said. 'Heh-heh-heh! It has crossed my mind ...'

'Has it?' asked Knox, a little startled as he looked at his companion's glass. 'Excuse me, Dr Fell, but what's that you're drinking? Have you deserted English beer?'

A long sniff rumbled in Dr Fell's nose.

'On the contrary, my dear fellow,' he answered. 'Say, rather, that it has deserted met: has deserted us all. American-type beer, you know,' and he lifted his glass, 'has much to recommend it. In these degenerate days, when English ale is brewed so weak as to have little more alcoholic content than ice-cream soda, give me a sound lager like Alt Heidelberg or Milwaukee Pride! Trinc heil, as the Saxon toast was! Nunc bibendum est! Mud in your eye'

Knox, who was himself drinking Milwaukee Pride, took another sip and cradled the glass.

'We have established,' snorted Dr Fell, as one outlining a fair proposition, 'that you and I are both bound on the same errand: a winter lecture tour for the Boylston Bureau of 666 Fifth Avenue. Based on New York, of course, but covering a good deal of the United' States. Your tour, I should imagine, will last for ten weeks?'

'Yes, about that. I begin at Cincinnati on January 18th, and end at Lancaster, Pa, on the last day of March.'

'A schedule,' said Dr Fell, 'not unlike my own. I begin the nefarious work at Albany, and end it at a place called , never mind. Tell me, sir: is this the first time you have ever gone a-lecturing?'

'Professionally, yes.' But I don't mind the travelling, and I enjoy

meeting people. I'm looking forward to it.'

`In that case,' intoned Dr Fell, `you will probably enjoy yourself. However! Let an old campaigner, who succumbs to the platform temptation almost every other year, warn you of certain things that are bound to happen.'

`Well?'

`Despite an itinerary carefully prepared by the lecture bureau, you will find yourself pushed aboard planes at unholy early hours, of the morning. Please accept the fact that no commercial aircraft ever takes off on time, even when the weather is good. When the weather is bad, and you are obliged to use trains or buses, these develop similarly erratic habits. Travel with; as little luggage as possible, I counsel you! Otherwise, carrying a heavy suitcase, you will be deposited at a bus station from which no taxi to your hotel is obtainable. In February, when they are likely to send you through the Middle West, a; blizzard will paralyse whatever city you happen to be performing in. With all planes grounded, and every jam-packed train running six to ten hours late out of Chicago, you will land back in New York, if you land back at all, towards four o'clock in the morning. Oh, my eye ! But I will not bedevil you further, since you don't seem to believe one word of this ..."

`Frankly, I'm trying not to

`I will merely,' said Dr Fell, `leave you with a somewhat disturbing thought. As a visitor from another country, are you sure they'll understand your way of speaking?'

Philip Knox, astounded, stared at him.

`Understand my way of speaking, for God's sake? In case it's slipped your mind, Dr Fell, I am -an American. I was born and brought up in White Plains, New York.'

Dr Fell, walloped by enlightenment, merely succeeded in looking cross-eyed and half-witted.

`So you were!' he boomed, flourishing the cigar. 'Archons of Athens, so you were! And I knew it. All the same: how long have you made your home in England?'

'Just over thirty years. Thirty-two, to be exact.'

`Oh, ah, to be sure! And I knew that too. Your accent is Eastern

American, as it has always been. But in the course of years, my dear fellow, we have grown so used to you that we hear what we expect to hear, and imagine you speak precisely as we do. On what subject are you lecturing, by the way?'

`Mysteries o f the Past, some classic riddles of history, if that doesn't sound too pompous?' Knox grinned. `What's your subject?'

`Murderers I Have Met,' replied Dr Fell.

The smoking room was not actually full of cold draughts, although for some reason it seemed to be. Dr Fell appeared to feel this; he seemed overly grave or even a little uneasy, settling back in the big chair and bracing himself.

Underneath them the deck rose up in a long balloonsurge, climbed, and then dropped steeply down a kind of chute. The sea smote Illyria's plates as though with a fist. Knox staggered a little, clutching at the back of a chair, righting himself as the ship steadied, and called for a refill both of Dr Fell's glass and his own. When this had been done, with the steward still hovering in the background, he sat down beside a little table facing his companion.

`Dr Fell,' he said, `what's the matter with you?'

'Matter?'

'You've got something on your mind, haven't you? You sit there blowing smoke and sparks like the Spirit of the Volcano, more distressed than a little rough weather can account for. What's bothering you?'

`There is nothing, really! Or nothing, at least, that I can (harrumph) isolate or pin down. And yet - White Plains, you said! That is the county town of Westchester, what Americans rather raffishly call the county seat? Yes. I have visited White Plains; I may visit it again. When my speaking tour is ended, Mr Herman Gulick, the District Attorney of Westchester County, has kindly invited me to visit him for a month and await the opening of the World's Fair late in April. Are you acquainted with Mr Herman Gulick of White

,Plains?'

`Lord, no! I haven't even seen the place in a donkey's years. It's unlikely I should be acquainted with the District Attorney.'

`And yet surely, somewhere nearby, there is a place called Richbell?'

`There is. It's about a dozen miles from White Plains.'

`Forgive me; I am not wool-gathering; what exactly is Richbell?'

`The town or village of Richbell, named for a certain John Richbell who founded the adjoining village of Mamaroneck in 1661, is one of the stops on the New Haven Railroad's suburban passenger, line from Grand Central Station through Westchester to Stamford, Connecticut. Richbell is the stop after Mamaroneck and before Harrison.' Again Knox grinned, this time reminiscently. `In the dim and distant past, come to think of it, I knew a girl who lived there. When I was in my middle teens, during the nineteen-twenties, I used to sneak my father's car and drive over to take her out. It's a handsome little town, or used to be.'

Dr Fell concentrated in cross-eyed fixity. `Oh, ah. And, speaking of that subject .

`What subject?'

'Women!' roared Dr Fell, with rounded emphasis as though to deny non sequitur. 'Hang it all!' he argued, drawing in air with a hollow noise like wind, through a cavern. `You have lived in England for thirty-two years; I have known you for at least sixteen of them; and yet not once have we ever discussed personal matters. For instance, are you married?'

`No. Yes! That's to say-!'

`To say what?'

`I was married. It's all past and gone; it's water under the bridge.' Knox felt a trifle rattled. `We separated close to twenty years ago, a few months after the end of the war; we haven't seen each other or communicated since then. But nobody's ever started divorce proceedings, so I suppose we're still married.'

`Your wife was American? The boyhood sweetheart from Richbell, perhaps?'

`No, it was nothing like that! The girl at Richbell was called Constance, though for the life of me I can't remember her last name. Judy, my wife, was very much English. Then, when we decided to split up, she went off to America ...'

'The lady was English, yet when you separated she went to America?'

'Yes; it's not really very complicated.' Knox was almost roaring in his turn. 'Judy had money of her own; she was too proud to take a penny from me. Anyway, a favourite uncle of hers had gone out to San Francisco and made a fortune there. Just as we were' deciding to go' separate ways, she got word that Uncle What'sit had died and left her everything. So she went off to New York, and then to San Francisco to claim her inheritance. That was October, '45; it's now January, '65. ; End of story. And her name's not - Judith, by the way, "Judy" is no contraction of the sort. I called her Judy, as she called me Punch.'

'Not, I hope, for the same tempestuous reasons?'

'Not at first, no. Judy's ten years younger than I am. We were married at a London registry office - in '38; for some time it was quite a grand passion. But she accused me of something; I accused her of the same thing, and it worked up into a blazing, row. That's all.'

'Yet I sincerely trust,' Dr Fell rumbled, with a kind of. Gargantuan distress, 'I am not reopening old wounds? You don't still feel ...?'

Well, how did he feel?

Seated opposite the doctor, lighting a cigarette and juggling the glass he had drained almost at a gulp, Philip Knox tried to assess the past with honesty. Who was right? Who was wrong? He didn't know; he couldn't guess; what matter anyway? It was absurd and even grotesque that the image of Judy - as she had looked then, as to a degree she might still look now - should still have the power to move him. But it didn't have that 'power; beyond the first months of separation, it never had: except occasionally, or when he had taken too much to drink. Certain memories, it is true, can wind into the brain and heart. And yet - after twenty years? No, forget the whole thing. It was buried, finished, forgotten!

'No, I do not feel,' Knox retorted. 'It's ancient history and must remain so. There have been other women in my life; certainly other men in hers. Besides, now that I'm an old man ...'

'You don't look an old man, I'm bound to confess.'

'As a general, rule I don't feel or behave like one. But ask the younger generation; they'll tell you.'

`Speaking of the younger generation: forgive me, were there children of this marriage?'

`No, there were no children; neither Judy nor I wanted them. Look here, Dr Fell,' Knox burst out, `how did we get on this subject in the first place? Judy went to San Francisco, as I said; somebody once told me she's still there. It's in the highest degree improbable we are ever going to meet again. In the unlikely event we did meet, we'd meet only as the strangers we probably always were. End of story, I said! Why the hell are we discussing women anyway?'

`Because you insisted on knowing what troubled me.'

`Well?

'Well!' said Dr Fell making a broad and half-witted looking gesture. `We are three days out from Southampton; it will be three or four more before we land. Am I growing psychic in my old age? Am I, by thunder? And yet (archons of Athens!) how to explain the atmosphere of this liner, which is sometimes like that of an overdecorated haunted house, except by the atmosphere surrounding a certain woman who is our fellow passenger?'

Knox sat up straight. `Do you by, any chance mean Lady Severn?'

`Yes, I mean Lady Severn - But let us define our terms.'

`Define our terms?'

'She is Lady Severn,' insisted Dr Fell as one being scrupulously accurate. `She is Lady Severn of Somerset and of Cannes on the Cote d'Azur. Lord Severn, I believe, died several years ago. Still! Under the name she, now uses - her real name, the name she was born with as well as her former stage-name - she appears in the passenger list as Miss Margery Vane. As Margery Vane she was born fifty-four years ago in Montclair, New Jersey, the daughter of a prosperous doctor. Her childhood friend and follower, the same age or perhaps very slightly older, was a girl named Elizabeth Harkness.

`And now, my dear Knox,' Dr Fell continued, 'I would probe further into your own early memories. Patience and bear with me! We shall not return to your wife. But we shall very much return to the town of Richbell. Since you were well acquainted with it in your teenage years, does the name Adam Cayley mean anything to you?'

To Knox half-buried memories stirred and flew back.

`Adam Cayley!' he exclaimed. `Adam Cayley and the proposed Westchester Players, the all-year rep which was to make the name of the new Mask Theatre in Richbell! In (I think) 1928. They intended to open in the spring. I was in college at the time and didn't get the full story, but I heard'.

`You seem to have heard correctly,' said Dr Fell. `We are still dealing with biographical matters; let me supply names and dates.

`The long-late Adam Cayley; whom I knew slightly in my salad days, was born of well-to-do English parents in Dublin about 1867. He was never associated with the Abbey Players or any Irish movement; he remained aggressively and picturesquely himself. But as an actor he scored his first great success at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin, which in the early years of this century must have looked much as it looks now. Moving on to London, he scored even greater triumphs before and during World War One. Adam Cayley specialized in Shakespeare or in dashing, romantic parts. He was a fine swordsman even in an age which thought good fencing essential to any actor; he made the best Cyrano de Bergerac I ever saw.

"At the end of World War One, seeking fresh woods, he invaded New York and conquered Broadway. By the mid nineteen-twenties he had earned a great deal of money and invested it wisely, avoiding speculation in a frantic stockmarket. He bought a house near Richbell and collected antique weapons as a hobby. Though hardly a young man by this time, he had no thought of retirement. He could have remained on Broadway as long as his talents lasted. But his great dream-... I think you know what it was?"

`Yes!' Knox fired -back. `Even in those days, you see, making up a theatre party for New York a getting the tickets, getting- to town, having dinner, getting back again entailed too much of a production to be done very often; it was like a minor military campaign. Many people said that a good year-round repertory company in Westchester County, not merely summer stock, would draw crowded houses at any time.'

Dr Fell's cigar had gone out, though he continued to flourish it.

`This, then,' Dr Fell went on, `was Adam Cayley's great dream. He would found such a permanent rep, to be called. the Westchester Players; he would direct it and play the leads himself. In Richbell-Avenue, the main street of Richbell, there was already an old theatre of sorts.'

`The Bijou!' -Knox exclaimed. `I can just remember it. But--!'

'But it was only the "opera house" common to rural districts, used occasionally by travelling companies of no great name or skill. And it had a bad reputation. Years before, when a florid melodrama was being played there, one unstable actress lost her mind and stabbed another to death on the stage. Adam Cayley would have no traffic with the old Bijou. Instead...'

This part of the story Knox did not have to be told. In 1927 the Bijou had been completely demolished. On its foundations, towards the end of the year, rose up a fine new concrete temple which Adam Cayley elected to call the Mask. It had the most modern of scenic and lighting devices for its time. But a breath of the past blew through the auditorium, the only part most audiences ever saw. The auditorium, with its gilt and red plush, its dress circle and its four ornate boxes, was said greatly to resemble that of the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin. By 1928 all was ready.

`Meanwhile,' rumbled Dr Fell, `our actor manager had not been idle. Adam Cayley was a conscientious artist. He had always surrounded himself with competent players; challenging competition rather than making it a one-man show. For his new theatre he must enlist a first-class company, and he must choose a leading lady. The leading lady he chose against all advice, a girl not yet quite eighteen years old, was also a neophyte doing her first small parts on the road.

"I will train her," Cayley said to them. "Wait and see."

`Well, he trained her. By thunder, but didn't he! He trained, he polished; for months of gruelling work he kept her at it; early in '28, at just past sixty, he married her. '

`Adam Cayley was very much in love, There can be no doubt he doted on his dark-haired charmer or that she held capricious ascendancy over him; though, Cayley being an old pro, she did not get her own way in everything. There was one young actor to whom for some reason she took a violent dislike and urged her husband: to get rid of him. Cayley refused; the lady stormed, but the, offender stayed. He stayed, that is, until. . . '

`All omens seemed good. A horde of theatre lovers subscribed for the season; Cayley had considerable wealth of his own to back him, and a shrewd business manager whose name for the moment escapes, me. To open his theatre he selected Romeo and Juliet. Yes! At sixty-

one he would play Romeo to his bride's Juliet, and leap-about the stage as he had always done. It is true he had a heart condition of which his doctor had warned him. The great man, calling this mere foolery, concealed the facts from everybody. He was Adam Cayley, who had never missed a performance; he was made of iron, indestructible!

`A brilliant first night; had been planned for April 25th. But attendance at the dress rehearsal, April 24th, was confined to close friends and by invitation only. Not many people were there to watch a production as superbly mounted as Cayley could arrange. Yet they found it quite, a performance. Cayley's training of his pupil, as we say nowadays, was paying off. Margery Vane began brilliantly as Juliet, though she was not on stage for Romeo's sensational duel with Tybalt in act three, scene one. Cayley himself, they tell me, had never been better. Benvolio's line, "Here comes the furious Tybalt back again," he capped in full voice with, `Alive in triumph and Mercutio slain-

`And so on in that savage challenge; need I repeat it? Tybalt flung, his own defiance and lunged. Romeo parried and lunged in riposte. The sword flew from his hand; he reeled, clutched at the air, and fell heavily. Margery Vane, uncontrollable, ran screaming from the wings. But the end had come already; Adam Cayley was dead when they picked him up.'

Here Dr Fell puffed out his cheeks and made a hideous face.

`Well, what was the final result?'- he asked.

`It was his heart, then?' demanded Knox.

`Yes, it was his heart. They proved, that immediately. Still? Passing over the shock, the consternation, the hullabaloo, what was the final result? When legal affairs were cleared up towards the end of the summer, the young actress from New Jersey had become a rich widow at eighteen.

`But there had been other results in the meantime,

`For the Westchester Players, Cayley's death meant ruin. They would not be beaten, Miss Vane was quoted as saying; Richbell should have its theatre. Her first move had been to sack; the young actor who displeased her, afterwards she and William Estabrook, the business manager, tried everytting to save their venture.

`As a tribute to the deceased's memory they postponed the opening

for a fortnight. They then tried Romeo and Juliet, with a leading man rather too hastily, imported, and they failed. They failed with Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*, they failed with *The Circle*, audiences dwindled and vanished. For they lacked Adam Cayley - or his equal. Perhaps they had no need of a great star, but they, did need somebody with a name and personality, and they could not get one.

`Margery Vane reimbursed the holders of season tickets; she reimbursed such artists as were actually under contract; and, not without some ill-feeling, she disbanded the company. Since talking pictures had invaded show business with a yell, the future of Adam Cayley's temple was already decided.'

`She sold the theatre, did she?'

Dr Fell sighted along a dead cigar.

`She did not sell the theatre; she has never sold it. Every offer she firmly refused. Rented on a long lease to Huskisson Inc, it was wired for sound and became the Mask Cinema.

`As for Margery Vane, like a dutiful daughter she returned to the bosom of her parents at Montclair. There she waited three years for her twenty-first birthday and full majority. Then, very much the rich American widow, she went off to "do" Europe. In those days "Europe" meant Paris and the Riviera. For this young lady, a year later in '32, it also meant London. Still determined, still ambitious, she fell in with ageing but influential Sir James Maple, of the Henry Irving Theatre. It was unnecessary to marry old Maple; he gave her the chance she craved.

`Most newspaper readers know what happened. She did play Juliet. She was a first-class artist, and proved it. That Juliet was no fluke she demonstrated in successive years by capturing public as well as critics with such varied roles as Lady Teazle in *The School for Scandal*, Nora in *A Doll's House*, and Roman Vedia in a throw-'em-to-the-lions epic called *The Things That Are Ceasar's*.'

Rapidly Dr Fell summed, up ensuing years. Into Margery Vane's life strolled young Jimmy Ransome, eighth Lord Severn, who during the tax-easy mid-thirties had inherited broad acres and twenty thousand pounds a year. Presently she married him. Leaving the-stage after a final triumph,; she became the staunchest of British patriots as war clouds thickened towards storm.

`And look at her now!' boomed Dr Fell. `Sir James Maple is dead.

Lord Severn is dead. In London, in Somerset, and in southern France she is a famous society hostess; if not hostess to the best society, at least to any number, of notorious people. At the peak of her career she has turned herself into the complete English grande dame or a very fair imitation of one.

`Look at her now, I say! Amazingly well preserved, still handsome and (no doubt) desirable! You have never been formally introduced to her, you tell me. But you have nodded to her in passing. You have watched her queening it at the captain's table. You have seen her walking the deck with her faithful lifelong companion; Miss Elizabeth Harkness, and her "secretary", young Larry Porter, one of a succession of such young men she has kept about her in recent years.'

`Yes, but ... !'

`Come!' said Dr Fell. `You ask what troubles me, do you?

In reply I ask: since she is Lady Severn, with so few crosses to vex her spirit, what troubles her? Why does she carry with her an atmosphere - it might be fear or hate - which spreads cold wherever she goes? Of one thing I am certain. Whatever may be on her mind, it is not inspired by either of her two companions; on that I will take my oath. Where is its source, then? Whence or from whom does it come? What is that woman really thinking about?'

`All right, but couldn't it be a mood?' Knox argued. `Aside from this atmosphere you speak of, is there any actual fact to indicate trouble?'

`Well, yes,' answered Dr Fell. `I will not platitudinously remark that time brings its revenges. However! As talking pictures once killed what you call vaudeville and long threatened the legitimate stage, so the even greedier monster of television now menaces the life of films. The Mask Theatre is free. The Westchester Players have been revived. Under the direction of a well-known Irish actor named Barry Plunkett, and with a less well-known young leading lady named Anne Winfield, they will open on the night of Monday, April 19th, with Romeo and Juliet. Am I still woolgathering at trouble, or can you kindly oblige me with an idea?'

2 JOURNEY'S INTERRUPTION

A WHOLE convulsion of creaks and cracks animated panels, in the smoking room. Spray smashed across Illyria's bows as she plunged into a hollow of the sea, which drove past with a thunder audible even here. But the ship pitched less heavily now, and had almost steadied;

you did not need to seize at anything to keep your balance.

For the moment, at least, Philip Knox had forgotten his surroundings. He had almost forgotten Judy, the once-loved, who was God knew where. Dr Fell's recital had been so vivid that dead, indomitable Adam Cayley, no less than living, indomitable Margery Vane, seemed to breathe and move before him.

`Listen, Dr Fell!' he said, lighting a fourth cigarette. `I never knew the name of Adam Cayley's leading lady; or, if I ever heard it, I'd forgotten. Certainly I never connected her with the Margery Vane who made such a hit in -England thirty-odd years ago. My first year in London was '33, when she played Lady Teazle. Where did you get all this information, by the way?'

`For the most part,' replied Dr Fell, `from the lady herself. No sooner had we boarded this vessel than she accosted me and asked my advice. The anecdote about the young actor she unreasoningly detested and dismissed did not come from her; I daresay it wouldn't. I had it long ago from Harvey Baskerville, an old-time "Heavy" who, was the Friar Lawrence of the Westchester Players' original Romeo and Juliet. Harvey is close to eighty; he lives with his granddaughter in Bath. He is almost as unwieldy as I am, and badly crippled with arthritis, but he'll talk theatre until the cows come home. They all will. According to what he says of Miss Vane. ..'

`Who was the young actor she couldn't stand? What became of him?'

`Harvey didn't know. His name was John Fosdick. He played Tybalt on the night Adam Cayley died, and Cayley thought he had a great future. Apparently the expectation wasn't fulfilled, but nobody seems to know.'

`Am I correct in thinking,' Knox "pursued, `that when Lady Severn is at Cannes she has a house called the Villa des Anges? You see, Dr Fell, I have an informant too.'

One of Knox's close friends was Miles Hammond, another historian. Twenty years before, he knew, Hammond had been involved with Dr Fell in a sensational, seemingly supernatural murder case called the affair of He Who Whispers. Also concerned in the business had been Fay Seton, the woman Miles Hammond afterwards married. The Hammonds now lived at Nice, a hothouse atmosphere, and heard much of the Villa des Anges on the hill above Cannes.

'Margery Vane,' Fay Hammond had told him, `is in her middle fifties

and looks forty. That's quite a menage, that is. To show her democratic principles she has no personal maid, though she keeps a chauffeur and a cook and two housemaids. Larry Porter, the young American who's supposed to be her boyfriend, undoubtedly is her boyfriend when she's in the mood. Bess Harkness? There are those who say - they say how I hate their sly faces! - Bess's devotion to the Vane is abnormal and always has been. That's absolute bosh, take my word for it! Bess is far more interested in men than the Vane has ever been. She'd have shown it long ago, if any man had been enterprising enough to investigate. And she's not bad-looking either; if you study her. She's the Vane's faithful shadow because she's never had a chance to be anything else.

`As for the Vane,' Fay had gone, on, `opinion about her is sharply divided. Some maintain she's essentially generous and good-hearted, which at some times she is. Others swear she's a bitch clean through, which she can also be. I expect she's just a little of both, as most of us are.'

Knox did not comment on these facts or suppositions.

`One last question, Dr Fell, and I cease from troubling. Why are you telling me all this?'

'Because Miss Vane asked me to, and will be here soon to amplify the story in person. She is most anxious to meet you, being a great admirer of yours.'

Knox sat thunderstruck. `She is. WHAT?'

'Come! The lady has some pretensions to culture, you know. She has read all your books.'

`Well It's very flattering, of course. But - great God in the bushes! To say she has cultural pretensions because she reads my books is like saying she has cultural pretensions because she reads Will Durant or Arthur Bryant. I admire both those writers, but ...!'

`Tut!' roared Dr Fell. `Enough of this confounded modesty, and out upon it! You write the English language, whatever your pronunciation may be. Your best work - notably *Quinquireme of Nineveh* and *The Rolling English*. Road - is well studied and irresistibly presented. We may not always agree with you, but we've got to keep on reading.

`All the same ... !'

'There is another point, my dear fellow,' Dr Fell said suavely. 'What is your birthday?'

'July 14th, Bastille Day. Why?'

'So is hers. Same day, same month, same year; you are exactly the same age. The lady discovered this somewhere; it has greatly impressed her. Common stars, she thinks, may affect common destinies. How do you feel about astral influences?'

'Astral influences,' Knox exclaimed, 'remind me of - never mind. What we really need, don't you feel, is another beer?'

'I do indeed. Another beer,' cried Dr Fell, 'is most definitely indicated. But it's my shout this time, and I insist that ...'

He surged to his feet, immense in height as well as girth, propping himself wheezily on the crutch-headed stick. But he had no time to finish or even to signal the steward. This time a draught did blow through.

The left-hand door to the foyer swung open. Holding it wide, his back to it stood a tall, heavily built, amiable looking young man with crewcut hair and immaculate shawl collared dinner jacket. And Margery Vane made her entrance.

It would not be fair to say that she ran in or seemed at all upset or out of breath. Instantly poised, wrapped round in a mink coat, she stood easily to the ship's motion. Though not above middle height, perhaps a little below it, she convinced you by her bearing that she was stately and statuesque. Yet a hint of the kittenish underlay this. Her glossy black hair, highlighted, seemed the least trifle dishevelled as though from wind on deck. The famous face, wide-spaced dark blue eyes contrasting with short nose and broad mouth against her clear complexion, had a sheen of such expert makeup that no pallor would have been visible.

Behind her marched in a small, brisk, intensely feminine woman carrying a coat-hanger. Miss Elizabeth Harkness - her full name she signed Bess Tolliver Harkness - wore a less noticeable fur coat. Her darkish fair hair was confined inside a close-fitting hat. Despite shell-rimmed spectacles she was not at all bad-looking, as Fay Hammond had said, though so few people ever observed her.

'Honestly, Margery!' they heard her murmur.

All eyes, as usual, were on Circe.

Slipping out of the mink coat, Margery Vane displayed a young woman's arms and shoulders, almost youth's figure too, in a jewel-green gown as severely plain as it was fashion able and expensive. She handed the coat to her companion, who draped it on the hanger. Then Miss Vane moved forward with much grace and charm, giving Dr Fell a dazzling smile.

'Forgive me!' she said in her beautiful voice. 'Do please forgive me! But I have some reason, surely, for feeling a little distraught? I - I have just seen a ghost.'

Dr Fell remained unsurprised.

Indeed, madam? Whose ghost was it?

'Really, that is of no importance! Nothing on earth, believe me, is of less importance! And I know I was only dreaming.' She looked at Knox. 'But surely this gentleman is...?'

With something of a flourish Dr Fell introduced Knox to Miss Vane, Miss Harkness and Mr Lawrence Porter.

It was Lawrence Porter, ingenuous-seeming, rather pink of face, who now advanced in a general aroma of friendliness and brandy. Respectfully he extended his hand.

'You're Philip Knox, sir? ' I hope you don't mind my saying I don't go for books, as a rule.' But I've just read *The Rolling English Road*, and it was, goad. Sir, I'm here to tell you it was good! What's that part at the beginning? I can't forget it.'

Then, completely carried away, he reared up to declaim. His voice rang against bulkheads and sleet-storm.

'Before the Roman came to Rye, or out to Severn strode,

The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road.

A reeling road, a rolling road, that rambles round the shire,

And after him the parson ran, the sexton, and the squire;

A merry road, a mazy road, and such as we did tread

That night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head.

I knew no harm of Bonaparte, and plenty of the squire,

And for to fight the Frenchman I did not much desire.

But I did bash their baggonets

Margery Vane's look altered as she lifted a hand imperiously. 'Larry! Please!'

'Eh?'

'That will do, I think. Stick to tennis and other things; - let elocution 'alone. You scramble your consonants; you haven't the knack. That will do, I said.'

'Oh, all right! It was only that -'

'Yes, dear. I'm sure Mr Knox appreciates the compliment. But he didn't write those verses, you know, he, only quoted them, and they're not supposed to be taken too seriously; I wonder, Mr Knox,' she added with a certain coyness, 'whether Dr Fell has explained ... ?'

An infection of dramatics was in the air. Knox caught it.

'It's an honour and pleasure to be presented to you, Miss Vane. Dr Fell, has explained, at least, that the new Westchester Players are reopening the MaskTheatre at Richbell late in April. Romeo and Juliet, isn't it? I imagine you're going over for the opening night?'

'To Richbell? Good heavens, no!'

'No, Miss Vane?'

'I am visiting friends in Florida, that's, all. I wouldn't and couldn't go anywhere near Richbell or the Mask Theatre. I had rather a horrible traumatic experience there when I was at a too, too impressionable stage of youth! And in any case I should hardly be going more than three months before the opening, now, should IF

'No, sorry; forgive me.'

'Not at all; how were you to know?'

'If you ask me, Margery-' began Lawrence Porter.

'We don't ask you, Larry. But I do take an interest, Mr Knox, in the dear people who are trying so hard to succeed where poor Adam

failed. And there is certain information you must have if you are to advise me properly. Will you both join me and Bess and Larry, of course in a little

impromptu party? But not in the bar here; the bar is so uncongenial, don't you think? Let it be the sports lounge on the deck above. That is,' she whirled towards the steward, 'that is, if they'll consent to serve us?'

Georgie, the smoking room steward, stood instantly at attention. 'In the sports lounge, m'lady?'

'Yes! May we be served there?'

'There's nobody on duty at night, m'lady. Since it's you,

'though, m'lady, only too glad to serve you meself. What would you like, m'lady?'

'How kind of you! How: too utterly kind! Champagne, I believe, is considered appropriate for these occasions, though to a true palate it's wretched overrated stuff. Don't you think so, Mr Knox?'

'Frankly, Miss Vane, I like it.'

'Hear, hear!" murmured Bess Harkness.

'Well, since you insist, I suppose we must indulge you. Let it be a magnum of champagne, then!. Pas trop sec, as the French are so fond of saying. A Mumm or a Perrier-Jouet will do nicely, if you have either? Thank you so much. Your arm, Mr Knox. Your arm, Dr Fell. This way, please, if you will be so good?'

Again Lawrence Porter held open the door. Three of them, with Margery Vane's right arm hooked through Knox's left and Dr Fell at her other side, negotiated two steps down to the foyer of the Promenade Deck. Porter and Miss Harkness obediently followed. From the direction of the main lounge a hoarse voice called bingo numbers through a microphone. The, lift waited to whisk them up one flight to the Sports Deck.

The sports lounge, a daytime haunt, at this hour was bleakly lighted and rather gloomy. If their hostess's taste might have preferred the luxury of the main lounge, rose and white and gold and crystal, such confidences as she had to impart would have gone badly with the bingo session below.

On either side of the sports lounge a low platform with red-topped tables ran port and starboard beside a high wall of uncurtained windows. At the end of each platform a heavy door with a glass panel at rather above head-height led to the open sports deck in the direction of tourist-class quarters aft. There was a piano between these two outside doors. Forming the middle of the forward bulkhead, in the direction from which they entered, an immense relief map in colour, showed the British Isles and the continent of North America, with tracks whereby the red arrowhead peg labelled Illyria could be moved its sailing distance each day. All platforms surrounded a spacious floor with a board for table tennis.

And yet Margery Vane seemed at home here. Choosing a table midway along the platform on the port side, she gathered her companions close to hold- court. The champagne was brought, opened, and poured. Their hostess signed the chit and stood up.

'Absent friends!' she breathed, lifting her glass. The toast was echoed. 'Do you know ... Larry, Larry, I'm afraid I've quite forgotten my handbag! Run down to Suite M-5, won't you, and get it off the dressing table in my cabin?'

Miss Harkness sat forward. 'I'll get it, Margery. The simplest thing-'

'No, no, Bess! You work much too hard already. Larry will be glad to get it for me: won't you, Larry? Run along like a good boy, and don't come back till you've found it!'

Wind and sleet whistled outside. But the deck remained navigable unless you were very careless. Young Porter hurried away. Margery Vane sat down again.

'Do you know, as I was saying,' she continued, radiating charm at Knox, 'this is the first time I shall have visited my native land in just under twenty years? My last crossing (I can even tell you the date) was by Queen Elizabeth on October 10th, 1945. She was still stripped down as, a wartime troopship, and was carrying I forget how many thousand Canadian troops back home to Halifax, Nova Scotia.' Once more the fine voice altered abruptly. 'What's the matter, Mr Knox?'

'Matter?'

'Just for a moment you had an awfully odd look! Did you make the trip yourself?'

'No, Miss Vane. But I know somebody who did.'

It had been an odd look, he supposed. How our destinies crossed and interwove whether we like it or not! By Queen Elizabeth from Southampton, on October 10th, 1945, Judy had gone out of his life.

Margery Vane was still intent.

`In those days you needed special permission to travel anywhere. But I had vital business interests to settle in New York; I got the permission. Bess went with me, of course. She's invaluable to me in business, though you mightn't think it to look at her, because she knows how to handle things. I can be very tough when it's necessary, but I can't always think of a plan. Bess can always think of a plan but can't ever be tough. Well, between us we settled the business in New York. But that voyage! Oh, good heavens, that voyage! Wasn't it a nightmare, Bess?'

Miss Harkness had accepted a cigarette and a light. Taking another drink of champagne, she sat back with her employer's coat across her lap and her cigarette motionless in mid air.

`It wasn't easy,' she confessed.

`Not easy, dear? It was ghastly!'

But, Margery ...'

`Paying passengers crowded six or eight into a cabin, sometimes ten! Nowhere to sit except that big lounge, and a dreadful loudspeaker issuing orders every minute as though we were a lot of delinquent children! Then, when we reached Halifax Isn't there an old prayer, Dr Fell, which asks God to deliver us from 'Hell, Hull, and Halifax'?'

Dr Fell spoke past a fresh cigar.

`The Halifax in question, Miss Vane, refers to Halifax, Yorkshire, and not Halifax, Nova Scotia. At Halifax, in the sixteenth century, they cut off the heads of condemned men with a primitive and clumsy form of guillotine much dreaded throughout the country.'

`Well, the Nova Scotia Halifax was no earthly paradise either. As if that horrible crossing hadn't been bad enough, more ridiculous rules threatened us in getting from Halifax through Montreal to New York. By wartime American law, you weren't allowed a sleeping berth on any train unless you, were going more than five hundred miles. But Bess thought of a way; didn't you, Bess? We just booked through to Washington and got off at New York. However, I fear I am digressing.'

Tobacco smoke drifted up under the bleak lights, reflected in window glass against black night and howling sea. Margery Vane, though disdainful of cigarettes, sprang to her feet amid smoke and again lifted her glass:

'To the Westchester Players,' she said, 'who will soon have a different name! And now, with your permission, we come to the real business of the evening.

'The new company is headed by, Mr Barry Plunkett. Mr Plunkett is quite a young man, not much more than thirty-five. But he has gained some considerable reputation: first in Dublin, then in London, latterly on Broadway. I have never met Mr Plunkett, though we have corresponded extensively; I may say I like his ideas. And I have heard much of him. At times he is inclined to be erratic, like all the Irish; but he is steady enough, as Americans say, when the chips are down.

'The company in general seems a good one. About this Winfield person, who is to play feminine leads, I know nothing at all. Of her perhaps the less said the better.

'For the rest, though, shall we cavil too much? Their technical adviser for Shakespeare is Judge Cunningham. The business manager (also unpaid; he does it as a hobby) is a retired stockbroker named Judson Lafarge.' His wife, Mrs. Constance Lafarge, presides as a kind of *amica curiae* and is described as an influential Westchester matron.'

To Philip Knox old memories were flooding back.

'Connie!' he exclaimed. 'Was her maiden name Constance Westerby, of Fenimore Cooper Avenue in Richbell? And do you mean Judge Graham Cunningham of the New York State Supreme Court? He's retired too, they say, but ...'

'My dear man,' cried Miss Vane, 'am I a crystal gazer or a mind reader or an old gypsy woman, that I can tell you the maiden name of somebody I never heard of until a few months ago? But the gentleman in question is the same Judge Cunningham. He is a Shakespearean scholar and a collector of old weapons. He bought Adam Cayley's old house; before I left the country, in 1931, I sold him Adam's collection of weapons to add to his own. And Judge Cunningham,

according to Mr Plunkett, has some very imaginative suggestions for "dressing" Romeo and Juliet.'

Vast grunts and wheezes racked the bulk of Dr Fell.

`Madam!' he boomed.

`Yes, Dr Fell?'

`We are civilized people, we hope. So are- the Westchester Players. At the same time, all superstition apart and disregarding hocus-pocus, are they altogether wise to begin with that particular play?'

Margery Vane looked at him.

`They think they are,' she retorted. 'And why not? Why ever not?'

`Common sense, admittedly, provides no valid' reason.'

`Come!' - said Miss Vane. `Do the public, the paying customers, remember old tragedies? You bet they don't! When these' dear people succeed as succeed they must if they take my name - nobody will care how or in what. And shall we or they, as you intimate, share the superstitions of the theatrically vulgar?'

'During the existence of the ill-fated Bijou, a psychotic actress went berserk and stabbed another. What of that? Poor Adam's life was lost through vanity and stubbornness, in, ignoring his doctor's advice. What of that? Mr Plunkett's company is unlikely to contain homicidal lunatics; and the most cursory medical check-up can ensure that nobody drops dead on the stage. I myself, could not go near that theatre, either for the dress rehearsal or the opening night. But that is a private thing, a personal thing; if you like, an emotional thing.'

Rapt, far away, she swung sideways and stalked along the port-side, platform, to the heavy door, aft,; leading, to an open deck. She was not tall enough to look out through its glass panel, but she did not try. Instead, poised there under another bleak light, she swung round. Face, voice, and gesture were hypnotic as she raised her arm to address them.

`And yet I have been tempted; I own I have been tempted. I love fine fencing, as I always have; and this Mr Plunkett assures me, is to be of the most authentic.

`Do you remember the wartime Old Vic Company, under the aegis of Olivier and Richardson, at the New Theatre in Chasing Cross Road? When the then Mr Laurence Olivier played Richard the Third, with the then Mr Ralph Richardson as Henry of Lancaster (in '44, surely?) it ended in a stage fight so spectacular that I all but pitched headlong from the box.

`And so I have been tempted, I confess. I have been tempted to call for a special dress' rehearsal of Romeo and Juliet, which shall be witnessed only by myself and one or two friends. I have even been tempted (heaven help me!) to thrust aside this presumptuous Winfield girl and myself play Juliet as she ought to be played. But it won't do; none of it will do; it is out of the question! It would be crude and vulgar and unworthy of me; and in any case I could not force myself.

`Still! Neither will I bore you, dear friends, with a tragedy nearly forty years old. Instead ...'

Back she stalked, a work of art and beauty in the jewel green gown, to the smoke-mist above the table. All glasses were empty except that of the absent; Lawrence Porter. Picking up the bottle, Margery Vane essayed to fill them. But handling a magnum of champagne is no simple matter in choppy weather; it was Knox who took; it from her arms and did the honours.

`Yes, Miss Vane? You were saying?'

`Another toast, please. A toast, I beg, to those Westchester Players who will soon (I hope) become the Margery Vane Players. Let an ageing woman stand aside for her betters! May fortune favour the bold! May these dear people-' She broke off, and her voice went shrilling up. 'Oh, God damn it, Larry, are you back again?'

Mr Porter, in fact, had appeared in the doorway to the deck's foyer. He carried a large black velvet handbag with a diamond clasp; his face was more pink, and congested blue veins showed at his temples. Mounting the step to the platform, he stalked towards them with slow, clumping, murderous care.

'Hell's' fire, woman!' he said.

`Really,. Larry! My handbag. ..' Mr Porter looked at her.

`There's the damn handbag,' he yelled, hurling it on the table. 'And it wasn't on the damn dressing table either, as I knew it wouldn't be. It was under the pillow in our .. in your ... oh, God's teeth!'

There was a slight pause.

`Really, Larry ! Though you have forgotten what few good manners you ever possessed, must you forget elementary decency too?'

The pink face had gone scarlet. Young Porter flapped his arms.

`Look, Margery, I'm sorry! I never meant ... I didn't think ...'

`No, you never do. And I overlook the gaucherie, since it seems I must. But you have said quite enough for one evening.'

`Sic down and be quiet, Larry!' Bess Harkness interjected. `Besides, Margery was just proposing a toast.'

`Indeed I was,' said the superbly poised Miss Vane, `and once more to the Westchester Players. They have heard my terms, from, which I will not deviate. If they change their name to the Margery Vane Players and hang in the foyer Augustus John's painting of me as Juliet, I will give them the theatre as a free gift. Its upkeep is modest, its rates negligible. A generous offer, I think? Almost certain to be accepted?'

Dr Fell eyed her.

`A generous offer,' he, rumbled, `which they are most unlikely to refuse. At the same time, are there any plans beyond - a name and a beginning? You are not accustomed to backing losers, you know. What if they fail?'

`If they show signs of failing, as must become known to me in Florida, I will join their company and play the leads myself. They will not fail then, believe me!'

She began to pace back and forth behind the table, her dark blue eyes fixed.

`And yet, though I have denied fatality or ill-luck in connexion with that theatre, I sometimes wonder. Adam, for instance: poor Adam! So gifted! So well-meaning! And yet so stuffed with vanity!'

`In my young days, madam, I had some slight acquaintance with Adam Cayley. He was opinionated, yes. But he never struck me as unduly vain.'

`By which you mean, dear doctor, he never showed it in public. I knew him in private, when he had no need to be the good fellow standing drinks. I was his wife; I loved and admired him, but - oh, dear! And was his judgement always good, for that matter?'

`His judgement?'

`Adam maintained, you see, that some of the old melodramas could

make wonderfully fine theatre if, only we played them straight and didn't burlesque them. From the late William Gillette, who at that time was very much alive, he obtained the rights to one such sensation piece made famous by Mr Gillette during the eighties or nineties. "An actor worth his salt, Margery, can recite the multiplication table and get away with it." Alas, he never lived to show us!

`The play, Miss Vane: was it by any chance Mr Gillette's Sherlock Holmes?'

`No, Dr Fell. Even for vintage 1899, Adam said, Sherlock Holmes was too poor a play to hold- any interest beyond sentimental association with the character or with Mr Gillette himself. No, really now! The play he chose is called Secret Service, though it has no concern with our present day 007's. Its main action takes place in a telegraph office during the American Civil War.'

`Was Adam's judgement good, I have asked?' she cried. `Was it good, even, with the people he chose for his company? Of all those hopefuls thirty-seven years ago, how many of us are still alive or reasonably prosperous?'

`Well?' demanded Dr Fell, with intense and even ghoulish interest. `How many are?'

`Strange to relate, dear doctor, one woman of the original company is actually returning with the new. Her name is Kate Hamilton. When I knew her Kate was a sweet-faced ingenue, the sort who plays Maria in The School for Scandal or the heroine's chum in almost anything. Today, I hear, she weighs fourteen stone and can't be called sweet-faced. But she's quite good in character parts; she can command an engagement whenever she likes. As for the rest of them ...'

`Yes? Go on!'

`As for the rest, where are they? Poor Will Estabrook, our business manager, took to drink and soon went downhill. Harvey Baskerville is old and crippled and dependent on charity in England. Sam Andrews, such a sweet person ...'

Lawrence Porter, who had gulped several glasses of champagne, now bounced up out of his chair.

`While we're on the subject, Margery, what ever happened to that poor devil Fosdick?'

Margery Vane looked as though she had not heard aright.

`To whom?' she asked, drawing herself up. `To whom, did you say?'

`John Fosdick, or some name like that? The one you hated so much and kicked out? I never knew him; he was long before my time; but Sandy Mactavish was talking about him the other day.'

`Really, I have no recollection of any such person! Or, if he ever existed, he got only what he deserved and will go on deserving. Now will you keep out of this, as befits your ignorance, or do you prefer to go on calling me a whore?'

Again there was a thunderclap of silence.

`Look, Margery, nobody called you a whore! Nobody ever has; nobody ever could! I only said-'

`You use me at your own convenience, do you? Well! I am kicking you out, Master Lawrence- Porter; and, horrifying though the prospect must seem, you will have to go back to work. That will do; sit down and shut up. If anyone else has a sensible question to ask me, I shall be happy to answer it.

`With your permission, then,' said Dr Fell, `there is one question.'

`Yes-?'

`Whose ghost did you see this evening?' `Really, Dr Fell:'

'We may fence as much as you like, Miss Vane, but is fencing really necessary? You have asked for advice; you may need it more than you think. As an old duffer with some experience in such matters, I ask again in all passion and humility: whose ghost was it you saw this evening?' Margery Vane alone remained standing, a dominant figure above the table with the brimming glass in her hand.

`I thought I saw Adam himself. Out on the deck there!'

She gestured aft towards the heavy door with the glass panel. `I thought I saw him standing by the companionway to the boat deck, wearing the same plaid cap he used to wear, and stretching out his hand as though to touch me. I only thought I saw him, of course; I know I was dreaming.'

`Miss Vane,' said Dr Fell, `are you sure?'

`No, no, it's the point of what I'm trying to tell you: I dreamed it!'

`That was not my question, Miss Vane.'

`It was definitely my answer, Dr Fell. I've asked for advice; so be it; but in my heart here I know what must be done. Westchester Players indeed! They'll be the Margery Vane Players if they know what's good for them. Let them try any funny business, the least little hint of funny business, and that Winfield snip is going to hear just where she gets off. And I'll fix his wagon for him, too; this time I'll fix it good and proper. Westchester Players, eh? If I never spoke another word in this world-'

Then, as Illyria shouldered down against a dying wind, there was another sort of thunderclap through the lounge. All five of them jumped to its explosion.

Outside the glass-panelled door a heavy pistol, revolver or automatic, was fired so close to the glass that the jagged star of the bullet hole sprang up flakily amid a jagged web of cracks. The bullet, missing their group by, yards, smashed deep into the great relief map forward, and left a gouge in blue plaster beside the red peg that marked the ship.

Lawrence Porter cursed and leaped to his feet, glass breaking against the edge of the table. Philip Knox was also on his feet. Bess Harkness clutched at the arms of her chair. Miss Vane herself, chin up and undaunted, swung round to look defiance at the door. Last to move was Dr Gideon Fell, who surged up supported on the crutch-headed stick.

`Did you dream that, madam?' he said.

3

STAR-CROSSED LOVER

`AND WHAT happened then?' demanded Judy.

Well, Knox reflected, the lecture tour was over now; it had been over for almost a month. The trees of Gramercy Park had crept into green, thickening each day as though with a breath of summer. Spring was in Philip Knox's blood. Towards dusk on the evening of Sunday, April 18th, he sat in the lounge of his hotel, the small and antiquated Gramercy House facing the park from the corner of 21st Street, and he looked across at the woman seated opposite.

Yes, it was over. He had been whisked through New England,, the Middle West, the Deep South. Every one of Dr Fell's prophecies had been fulfilled, including interminable hours at airports when planes didn't fly, and the MidWestern blizzard which for forty-eight hours sealed him up in Detroit. He had met intelligent people; he had been royally entertained; he had much enjoyed it.

`And yet,' he thought at, the last date, `I shouldn't care for another four weeks on top of the first ten.'

Almost his last engagement - late in March, he remembered now - had been to lecture at the Women's Club of Farleigh, Connecticut, next town to Greenwich on the New Haven Railroad. And the New Haven, despite passenger service grown unpredictably erratic of late years, carried him there in just over an hour. At Richbell, where the train crossed a bridge above Richbell Avenue, he tried to identify landmarks. In the distance he could make out the skeletal shape of a roller-coaster against snow-threatened sky, and couldn't remember whether there had been an amusement park of old. Closer at hand, in Richbell Avenue, the unmistakable bulk of the Mask Theatre showed on its marquee the words Margery Vane Players for an electric sign not yet illuminated.

When he left the train at Farleigh, a sleek, stoutening, vivacious woman with blue-rinsed hair hurried up and identified herself as Constance Lafarge, once Constance Westerby of Richbell.

`I'd have known you anywhere, Phil,' she declared, `even without your photograph in the publicity. You don't lecture until two o'clock. Come along and have lunch now, won't you?'

In her Cadillac hardtop she drove him to the Farleigh Country Club. March, scolding dame of the year, shrieked complaint at windows. Connie herself tended somewhat to gush. She spoke much of her husband, Mr Judson Lafarge. By a previous marriage she had two sons, one now in college and the other in the sixth form at Knox's old preparatory school, and these were discussed at some length. But she asked him no personal question until the dessert.

`Listen, Phil! Jud tells me you met Margery Vane on the ship coming over?'

Connie did not mention that wild night aboard. RIM Illyria, when someone unknown fired a 45 bullet. Evidently Jud had not told Connie, or Margery Vane had not told Jud. Knox did not refer to it either.

`Yes, we've met; Do you know her, Connie?'

`Only by report. She's Lady Severn, isn't she? Barry Plunkett saw her in New York before she flew to Miami, and it seems she's going to stay there.'

`How's the theatrical venture? She renamed 'em the Margery Vane Players, didn't she?'

`She's done more than that, Phil She's put quite a lot of money into the thing, Jud says. Maybe we'll need it. Jud has so much on his mind, poor, lamb, what with stagehands and musicians costing the earth to hire. 'I saw no reason for any musicians, and neither did Jud: But Barry Plunkett insisted.'

`Oh?'

`We've got to have a house orchestra, it seems, because there's one at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Does the Abbey Theatre have such very fine appointments, Phil?'

`No, it has not. Anyway, strictly speaking, there's no Abbey Theatre. It burned down in 1951; the Abbey Players are at the Queen's Theatre in Pearse Street. But it amounts to the same thing.'

`Yes, that's what Barry said. He, got his house orchestra; he'd get anything, he wanted. But he's not the begob-and-bejabers kind of Irishman, don't think that!'

`I don't think it, Connie. The begob-and-bejabers Irishman has never existed off the New York or London stage.'

`Barry's a graduate of Trinity College; he talks just like an Englishman, if you can imagine that. He's something of a hellion, but we all love him. And you, Phil!'

'Me?'

`I've sometimes thought,' a certain wistfulness had crept into Connie's look, 'I've sometimes thought, with you turning into a famous man and everything ... This lecturing doesn't go on much longer, does it? What will you do then? Go back to London?'

`Yes, but not immediately. I think I'll stay on for a few months; or, at least, until the weather gets too hot. With the Public Library almost on my doorstep, and the Museum of the City of New York no further away than 104th Street, I can do some research in American history

for a change. Dr Gideon Fell is here too, as you may have heard. And the hotel I'm staying at ...'

The Gramercy House at 21st Street, in fact, had been suggested by Dr Fell himself. With the old Murray Hill Hotel gone forever, Knox had not believed such a place existed or could exist. Despite spacious rooms it was not large; it was deftly managed it served excellent food. Ancient waiters bore trays through halls of carved cornices and chandeliers like glass castles. A holy quiet pervaded the bar. By night, with noise muted to a growl behind pale uptown lights, it might have served the New York of O Henry and Richard Harding Davis.

So the days had passed. Knox did not really work, though he pretended hard to be working and sometimes believed it. He haunted the Public Library, the City Museum, the secondhand bookshops of Fourth Avenue below Union Square. At the Broadway Theatre he saw 'Baker Street', which he had expected to detest but which proved so good-humoured and disarming a romp that he sat fascinated. Being a member both of the Garrick and the Thespis Club in London, as Dr Fell was, like Dr Fell he had a guest card for the Players across Gramercy Park.

'New York's all right,' he said to himself. 'Everybody curses it; nobody understands it. But you can't help liking the place at that.'

Connie Lafarge phoned several times, suggesting that he get together with her husband and herself. When she set no date, he did not press her. She insisted, however, that he must attend either the dress rehearsal or the first night of Romeo and Juliet, and this offer he thankfully accepted.

In short, he merely browsed and dreamed, away from the roar of everyday life. And then, less than a week ago ...

The time was past eight on a rainy Tuesday night, the place a restaurant, the St James' Grill, on East 54th Street not far from CBS. He had finished his steak-and-kidney pie, the specialty of the house; over coffee he was reading those columnists of the World Telegram whose gripes make life such a pleasure. He raised his head to order more coffee, but did not call for it. Judy, his once-wife, had just looked at him past the pink-shaded lamp on another table.

Judy.

She was very little changed, except to seem slightly more mature. Judy had amber-coloured eyes with dark lashes. The same glossy

chestnut-brown hair, worn almost at shoulder length, framed a face of hearty prettiness and deceptive innocence. If Margery Vane might be called Circe, to Knox it was Judy who had Circe's figure; it would have affected him if he had been on his deathbed. Tonight she wore a tailored suit of light brown tweed, with a pink sweater.

Often he had wondered how he would feel if he saw her again. Now he knew.

For a half second his heart seemed to stop beating, and then pounded at an enormous gallop. As for Judy's feeling, he knew that too. She was as startled as he. But her look had been one of fear, stark fear, and a desire to run. It sickened him, but there it was. She sprang to her feet, recoiling a little. Her hand scrabbled on the tablecloth for the bill beside her own finished meal.

Anyway, she was alone there. Knox got up and went to the other table.

`Good evening,' he said. `We have met before, I think. In case you don't remember me. ..'

`I remember you.'

The English voice, soft and slurred, sounded incongruous against harsher voices in the background. But she would not look at him, and her tone, though intense, was so low as to be barely audible,

`I remember you!' she said.

`In that case, won't you join me for coffee and brandy?'

`No! Is there one, good reason why I should?'

`Is there one good reason why you shouldn't? We were never enemies, Judy, even when we parted.'

`Oh, weren't we, though? I hated you! I still hate you!'

`Hate, Judy? After more than nineteen years?'

`Well! Not "hate", maybe. But we can't put the clock back, you know!'

He indicated the window, and rain splashing in torrents past the awning outside the restaurant.

`That, madam, is a self-evident fallacy. Each year, in this blithesome month of April, we put the clock forward an hour on the one night when most people forget it. In October, our work completed, we put it back again. In the literal sense we can put the clock back because we're always doing it. In the metaphorical sense, if that's what you mean, the question, is whether we want to put it back.'

`I don't, certainly. And don't pick up that check, please! Give it to me; I want to pay it!'

`With your permission, my dear, I will pay it. And you have not necessarily learned the language, Judy, because you say check instead of bill. In London they say check now. Not long ago I was sharply corrected by the waitress for saying bill. And we eat French fried potatoes, not chips or, except at the sweller restaurants, pommes frites. Even if you and I were the worst enemies on earth, can't you sit down with me for a moment? After all, I won't hurt you.'

'We-ell...!'

So began a new relationship, all brambles and uncertainties, now a little more than five days old. Judy was associate editor of Her Ladyship, a popular woman's magazine, and had an apartment in the East Thirties. He had insisted on seeing her every day, 'either for lunch or for dinner. On each occasion she would plead a previous engagement, and then usually (though not always) would yield. Even when you talked to her she remained as elusive as a ghost. He did not unduly harass her with questions. But he had to know what had been happening, and a little of this emerged at lunch on Wednesday.

`Have you been in New York all the time?' 'My goodness, no!'

`When I left England...'

`By Queen Elizabeth on October 10th, 1945. Do you remember?'

`Yes. Fancy you remembering!'

`On that crossing, Judy, did you by any chance meet a woman named Margery Vane?'

`Lady Severn, the actress? Why?? Is she another of your girlfriends?'

`Lord, no! I merely asked: did you meet Margery Vane?'

'I - I'm not sure. I: think I did. But it's such a long time ago! I - I

didn't like her-much , and she didn't like me even when she noticed me at all. Does it matter?'

Yet there was strain in the amber-coloured eyes; he wondered at it.

`As I-understood things, Judy, you were off to San Francisco to claim your uncle's fortune.'

`Uncle Jim's "fortune" was only brag and bounce. In New York, care of Cook's, there was a letter from his lawyer.' For all his talk Uncle Jim left nothing but debts. It's not important, now, but it was a nasty knock then. Without my own bit of money I don't know what might have happened.'

`Damn it, Judy, why didn't you ...?'

'Don't say that! Could I have accepted anything from you?,

'I don't see why not. But never mind that. What did happen?'

Judy studied her ringless hands.

'I -- I applied,' she answered, `for a post as secretary at the magazine I'm still with. For some reason they're tremendously impressed by English secretaries. Then I was lucky; I got a chance at editorial work; they kept advancing and advancing me. In '52 they opened a West Coast Office - at San Francisco, of all places, where I'd meant to go at the beginning!. - and put me in charge of it. It's wonderful there; you'd love ... or, no, I expect maybe you wouldn't. There aren't as many women in San Francisco as there are in Los Angeles.

`I've been in San Francisco, you see; I once met a mutual friend of ours, Bobby Drake. Towards the end of last year, for no reason anybody's ever explained, they decided to close the office. It was awful! In spite of everything there was no choice but to come back here. I had no choice, don't you see?'

`Not exactly, no. Kindly explain "in spite of everything". What's the matter with New York'

`Nothing! Absolutely nothing!' The amber eyes looked hard at him. `Can't we drop the subject, please? You've been almost nice to me today, Phil; don't turn, into Punch all over again. I won't be questioned; I won't be badgered! If you begin devilling me the first time we talk in twenty years, I'll walk out of here this minute!'

And he had to be content with that.

It could be no mere mood on Judy's part, of course. There must be much behind it, much she was concealing: some deep disturbance he could not fathom. His only choice was to bide his time and, if possible, laugh the devils away.

In ensuing days he faced the real trouble. He was falling for the damned woman all over again, if in fact he had ever been out of love. He knew this by a return of raging jealousy.

Falling again, and at his age? Nonsense! He was hardly so old or desiccated as all that. And Judy was - what? She would be forty-four in November, even if she looked little more than half that. At least he would not be robbing the cradle.

But those ancient memories?

Despite Judy's, fixed idea, he was no Don Juan or Casanova: although, considering the multitude of willing dames with whom London abounds, there had been several affairs in varying degrees of seriousness. With Judy it must have been much the same, only more so; well he knew her sensual temperament of old. He had no right to be annoyed at this, it was only sauce for the gander.

And yet ...

He laid his plans with care. Since he was expecting a call from Connie Lafarge, he made Judy promise to have dinner on Sunday evening and then spend the evening with him at some entertainment unspecified. She instantly demurred, saying arrears of work had piled up and must be seen to; then she consented.

Connie phoned his hotel on Saturday afternoon.

'Listen, Phil! The dress rehearsal is tomorrow night, remember. They've settled things with the Fire Department.' 'Settled things with the Fire Department?' 'During the season smoking is to be permitted in the dress circle. Most modern theatres don't have a dress circle, do they? But the Mask has one. Tomorrow night, Barry Plunkett says, you can smoke anywhere you like. Listen, Phil!' 'Yes?'

'They've been rehearsing all day today; they'll be at it all day tomorrow. The formal dress rehearsal - just the "dress", Barry calls it - will be at nine o'clock,; though Barry says he never knew a dress that began or ended when it was supposed to. They'll be in costume, with

orchestra, and play straight through without a break. You can be there, can't you?'

`With the greatest pleasure, Connie. May I bring a friend?'

`Of course; we'd be delighted! Look, Phil. Why don't you bring her along here to Farleigh, and have dinner with Jud and me? Then we'll all go to the theatre.'

`Sorry, Connie. It's very kind of you, but I already have a dinner date.' He had; he wanted Judy to himself. 'Oh, well, if she's as fascinating as that! There's a train from Grand Central at 7.55. Remember, on Saturdays and Sundays the Stamford Local goes from the upper level, not the lower. Jud and I will meet the train at Richbell. See you, then. Right?'

`Right, Connie, and many thanks. 'Bye.'

Later that afternoon he had dropped in at the Players Club. In the bar he encountered Dr Gideon Fell and Mr Herman Gulick, the District Attorney of Westchester County, with whom Dr Fell was now staying at White Plains. Dr Fell and Mr Gulick, a stocky, sallow-faced man with an affable but portentous manner, also gave him certain information about tomorrow night.

Things were shaping up nicely; what could go wrong?

And so, on Sunday evening, Philip Knox had dinner with Judy at the Gramercy House. Afterwards, as dusk began to smudge the sky over thickening greenery in the park, he sat with her in the lounge on the ground floor. Cupids and goddesses in painted plaster spread coquetry across the ceiling. The furniture was of marble and gilt upholstered with green plush. It had a dusty, mummified air; you almost expected a handsom cab to come rattling up to the door.

Judy, wearing a blue, dress, touched with white which set off her figure, was again in a mood. The pink mouth seemed twisted; her eyes sought comers of the lounge. And she kept saying everything was 'ridiculous'.

`For heaven's sake, Phil, what is all this? What's the mystery you're keeping back?'

`Judy, do you know the date today?'

`It's April 18th. What if it is?'

`As a ruddy Englishwoman, my dear, you may or may not find it significant.' Then his voice grew portentous.

`On the eighteenth of April, in seventy-five,

Hardly. a man is now alive

Who remembers that famous day and year.

`Do I suggest anything to you?'

`It's that tiresome Paul Revere man, isn't it? He climbed to the belfry of the Old North Church!'

`Paul Revere, Judy, didn't climb to that belfry or any belfry. Don't confuse him with Bessie What's-her-name in Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight. He saw one light in the tower, and rode seventeen miles to warn everybody the British were coming.'

'I'm not very familiar with your ridiculous American history, I'm afraid. They didn't teach us much at school.'

`Evidently they taught you Paul Revere's Ride. And not only Longfellow; I myself can testify they taught you Barbara Frietchie.'

`I don't know what on earth you're talking about!'

`Gently, my pet! May I remind you of a certain Christmas party in '43, at Bobby Drake's flat? You'd had six-old fashioned; you were three sheets in the wind. With eloquent gestures and full tonal effect you recited Barbara Frietchie and regaled the party. Memory still treasures the picture of you shading your eyes with your hand and reeling back to imitate Stonewall Jackson seeing the old flag.'

`Why must you hold that against me?'

`I don't. But you were dead serious, my pet. Though you now call everything ridiculous, you saw nothing ridiculous in one word you were saying.)

'Well, what was so ridiculous?'

`Again permit me to, remind you.

`Up the street came the rebel tread,

Stonewall Jackson riding ahead.

Under his slouch hat, left and right,

He glanced; the old flag met his sight.

"Halt!" The dust-brown ranks stood fast.

"Fire! Out blazed the rifle-blast.

It shivered the window-pane and sash,

It rent the banner with seam and gash.

But, quick as it fell from the broken staff,

Dame Barbara snatched the silken scarf.

`Judy, where was Barbara standing when she did that? How was it the rifle volley didn't ventilate her old grey head, or spread her all over the furniture? As for Stonewall Jackson-'

`Punch Knox, there are times I could kill you! You haven't an ounce of feeling or romance in your whole nature, not one ounce! All you ever wanted to do was just - just get down to business.'

`All right; what's wrong with that? May I add that on those occasions I never knew you to show the least reluctance.' `All right, all right! If you had any decency you wouldn't remind me. Anyway, those days are past and gone forever!'

'Of course they are.'

`As for your r-ridiculous Christmas party,' said Judy, `I - I had to do something. You were beginning to make passes at that awful Dolores creature, the stripper from the Windmill, and she was making passes at you. ..'

'Dolores Datchett, Judy,' was not a stripper from the Windmill. As a matter of academic fact, she was a swimming instructress from Penzance.'

`I knew it had something to do with taking off her clothes. And oh, there you were in your smugness, making passes at her-!'

`Whereas you, my dear, were already involved in more than, passes with Joe Hathaway, my esteemed colleague at the wartime BBC;'

`You beast! You absolute beast! I was never anything of the kind,

and you know it!

`I don't know it, Judy. I know only –'

`I wish I'd never seen you again! I wish you hadn't accosted me in that restaurant and bullied me into having coffee with you!' Judy flung up her arms. `Oh, Phil, can't you stop going on about Stonewall Jackson and tell me where we're supposed to go tonight?'

It was warm and, stuffy in the lounge. Distantly a taxi hooted from Lexington Avenue. Knox pulled himself together.

`Yes, sorry; I forgot. We're going to the theatre.'

`To the theatre? On Sunday night?'

`Yes. This is a dress rehearsal of Romeo and Juliet, starring Barry Plunkett and Anne Winfield. I'd better explain. Yesterday afternoon, a woman named Connie Lafarge phoned from Westchester . .

`She's an old girlfriend, isn't she?'

`Oh, for God's sake!'

`Well, isn't she?'

Knox counted to ten.

`The last time I saw Connie Westerby before this year '65,' he retorted, `I was seventeen years old and she was just over fifteen. Nothing of a comprising nature ever occurred. But where the hell did you ever hear of Connie?'

`You' mentioned her once; you were drunk.' Judy's voice rose. `Your love-life's your own; it's no odds to me and I couldn't care less. It's just that I won't be humiliated; I won't: have you intimating I used to sleep with every man we knew: I won't let you degrade me as you always wanted to!'

`E - easy, Judy! Easy, my seductive temptress! Let's keel a sense of proportion, shall we? Don't flare out that way; try not to sound exactly like Margery Vane when-'

`When what? When you made passes at her?'

`No; when her young boyfriend blurted out something he shouldn't have. If you can rid yourself of the delusion that I am some kind of

prize package, inspiring women with the same lyric feelings they show in television commercials for a new soap powder or hairspray, I'll tell you the whole story.

And he did.

Beginning in the smoking room of RMS Illyria, he recounted the entrance of Margery Vane, Bess Harkness, and Lawrence Porter. He took their party up to the sports lounge and continued it there. He described Miss Vane's varying states of mind, or tried to; he quoted conversations as well as he could remember them, having almost Dr Fell's photographic memory.

Judy grew very silent. Though at first inclined to suggest that, if he hadn't made passes at Margery Vane, it was only for lack of any opportunity, she let comment dwindle and die. Towards the Vane she kept up a curious attitude, a sort of wary aloofness, hard to analyse or pin down., But she was clearly fascinated by the story.

Knox told it well, the more so as he lived- it. To him the eighteen-nineties lounge of the Gramercy House - except for Judy's presence within touching distance - all but faded away. He heard the sea battering Illyria's plates; he heard creak of bulkheads and scream of wind die to near calm. He saw people as clearly as he recalled their words. Five persons were gathered round a table on the port side of the sports lounge; Margery Vane flew off at a tangent in certain cryptic threats; the crash of the shot blasted with palpable effect; Dr Fell arose to ask if she had dreamed that.

Judy sat up straight in her chair.

`And what happened then?' she demanded.

4

MASK THEATRE

`WHAT HAPPENED, my dear, was that all hell broke loose. The ship's second officer happened to be on the deck outside, going off duty or coming on duty or something. As that shot was fired through the glass panel, he very briefly saw the man who fired it. But he didn't get anything like a real look. The unknown turned round and bolted aft, where the officer lost him. He then came into the lounge to see if anybody'd been hurt,, after which he reported the incident. That was when hell broke loose. There was an investigation to end all investigations.'

Judy pondered. 'You mean the captain took charge?'

'Not obviously, anyway. At sea, Judy, the captain is much too godlike a figure to let his hand show in any rumpus. It was the purser who took charge, and how! He was trying to be tactful, I suppose, but he went on like a tough private eye in a story.

'There could be no certainty Margery Vane was the person fired at, though she was the only one standing up and the best target. There seemed to be a feeling she was the certain choice, bound to get it if anybody got it: the purser assumed that, as the rest of us assumed it.

'Did she know any passenger who would want to harm her? No, she did not: great emphasis. She had seen every passenger in first class, she said; except for her two travelling companions and Dr Fell, there was nobody she'd ever set eyes on before.

`Well, said the purser, what about tourist class? The unknown had run aft in that direction; all he needed to do was climb a railing. The next day they took the Vane - in case we could contribute something, they took all of us - to the tourist class dining room when all passengers were present. There are big inside windows through which you can see every soul in the dining room. She looked at 'em, she studied 'em, she swore they were all total strangers, and ...'

`And ... what?' prompted Judy.

Knox had been pacing the room, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

`I believed her,' he said, `I think she was telling the truth, as she was telling the truth about the passengers in first class. In fact, I'm damn sure of it!'

`Oh, Phil, can you be sure? The woman is or was - a famous actress.'

`She's an actress, all right. She can play anything and play it beautifully, until personal feelings begin to intrude. Then the mask slips and she blows up, as I've tried to explain. She

can no more control her feelings than ... than. `Than I can control mine, were, you going to say?'

`I wasn't going to say anything; of the kind.' Judy sprang to her feet

`This is ridiculous!' she burst out. `Somebody fired that shot! What about a ship's officer? Steward, member of the crew, somebody like that? I've heard of cases-'

`So have I. And our private-eye purser thought of it too. Though they didn't tell us until afterwards, - it seems-they "screened" everybody aboard. Either they wouldn't believe an employee of the Cunard Line could be such a lunatic, or they had good and sufficient evidence they didn't disclose.' But the purser assured us all personnel had been cleared.

`I'll tell you another thing, they did. They dug out the bullet, which somebody identified as a four-five. That's a hell of a big revolver, my dear: They made a secret, thorough search of everybody's quarters and belongings. No employee of the line was carrying a firearm that couldn't be accounted for, and no passenger was carrying a firearm at all.'

Judy continued to simmer.

`But if it definitely wasn't a member of the crew ... couldn't some passenger have been in disguise?'

`No. At close quarters it can't be done. We have Margery Vane's own assurance for that.'

`Then the whole thing's just impossible, don't you see?'

`Yes. Dr Fell has met impossibilities before.'

`Well, what did Dr Fell say? You hadn't met him in the old days, when we lived together and all those women were chasing you. But I know him by reputation, of course. What did he say?'

`Not much that seemed important or relevant. He said, "There are certain clues evident even to an old scatterbrain like myself." When I asked him if he couldn't even give a hint, he said, "I remarked, sir, that the atmosphere surrounding Miss Vane was one either of fear or of hate. It was not fear; she never turned a hair when she thought herself attacked. We must now agree it was hate. Begin there and go on,"'

`Go on where?'

`That's what I asked him. He just said to leave things in abeyance.'

`I have a question, Phil, since you've condescended to tell me so much already. It's about Lady Severn and her boyfriend, Larry Porter.'

`You're not suspecting that fellow, I hope? He hadn't been firing any revolvers; he was sitting there with the rest of us.'

`No, no! This is a personal thing, a psychological thing, what you'll probably call a silly thing. She said she was going to kick him out of bed, or that's what she meant even if she didn't use those words. Did she do it?'

'No. Either she's not as tough as she likes to think, or he got round her somehow. The next morning everything was smoothed over. She was still the great lady bossing the slave. But the sun shone, the birds sang, and all was gas and gaiters. When we touched New York they sent their luggage ahead by express, and flew off together to Miami.

`End of hullabaloo, my dear. Now I'd better tell you about the dress rehearsal, since we've got to get started very soon.'

He told her. Judy smote her forehead.

`Phil! It's not important, of course, but suppose that woman turns up for the dress rehearsal after all?'

`She won't turn up, as I've tried to explain. I neglected to say that yesterday afternoon I met Dr Fell and Herman Gulick, the district attorney he's staying with. Margery Vane keeps phoning Dr Fell from Miami, to ask if he's got any new ideas about the shooting. The last time she phoned was yesterday afternoon, and she still won't go near the Mask Theatre on a bet!'

`Is Dr Fell to be there?'

`Later, maybe; not at the beginning. It seems Judge Cunningham, who advises the Margery Vane Players on textual readings, costumes, and weapons, is very anxious to have the maestro in attendance. But it also seems there's a lawyers' club of which Mr Gulick is president: younger men, mostly. They meet for dinner on Sundays at the John J. Pershing Hotel in White Plains, and Dr Fell has promised to address 'em gratis on Murderers I Have Met. Then he and Mr Gulick will come on to Richbell'

Shadows had thickened in the-lounge. Knox drew a deep breath and glanced at his watch.

`There will be very few people present. I'm very happy you are with me, Judy, happier than you'll ever let me tell you. We take the 7.55 from Grand Central; it's now twenty-five to eight, and we'd better be off. There's just one thing, though. What name are you using?'

'What name am I using?'

She stared at him, her colour receding.

`Yes!' You don't wear your wedding ring; you want as little to do with me as possible. But I've got to introduce you to those we meet. What do you call yourself at the office?'

`Oh!' The colour had returned. `I'm Mrs Knox, Punch; I can't be anything else. It's always been a question of the passport.'

`Of the passport?'

`By American law I didn't assume your nationality when we were married. But by our law, as you know very well, any Englishwoman

misguided enough to marry an American can claim a British passport in her married name. My passport said - and still says - "Christine Dorothy Knox, wife of an American citizen." I needed it to enter this country; I needed it to become a resident alien; let's just say I needed it. I'm still your, wife, though (as they say) in name only.'

'I wish it weren't so, Judy.'

'You wish we weren't married? Well, really! If you had wanted a divorce as much as that, why on earth couldn't you have said so? Nothing would have pleased me better than ...'

'That wasn't what I meant! I meant-'

'What?'

'Never mind. Are you ready?'

'Yes. I'm ready.'

They found a taxi on Lexington Avenue. For once the driver was not loquacious, and had almost finished telling Knox his life story when they reached Grand Central.

Stuffy in the warm spring night, hollow with echoes, the upper level lifted its advertising slogans high above an acre of marble floor. Knox bought tickets. Remembering what he had been told on the telephone, he led Judy through a tall gate and down iron stairs to the cavern where the Stamford Local waited.

And Judy, despite occasional sweet-voiced dirty digs, for some reason seemed in a better and happier mood than she had shown since Tuesday.

'Phil, weren't you born and brought up in the part of the country where we're going? Do we pass through there on our way?'

'I was and we don't White Plains is only a dozen miles from Richbell, but you get there by a different train.'

'I saw the names of the towns on the noticeboard. Why, in New York, is it considered humorous to live at some of those places like; Rye or Cos Cob?'

'I've never learned, though it's a fact. Rye is slightly funny, Mamaroneck is still funnier, and mere mention of New Rochelle sends

some people into hysterics. Why, in London, is it considered funny to live at Chislehurst or refer to Clapham Junction? Just a moment!

They had reached the foot of the steps. Light from car windows spread mistily along the platform. Silver-ribbed air-conditioned, the train was one of the New Haven's most modern. At least it postdated the usual train, vintage 1903, which bumps like a sailboat in a choppy sea and jolts your neck loose from your spinal column.

Knox glanced over his shoulder. Down the stairs behind them strode a spare, straight-backed, elderly man, very well dressed and wearing a soft dark hat. He must have been past seventy; hair and clipped moustache were white. But health's bloom shone in his cheek and in his quizzical blue eye. His step was vigorous, his manner courtly.

The newcomer swept off his hat.

'Forgive me,' he said in a voice as vigorous as his step, 'but surely you must be Philip Knox, the late Hobart Knox's son ?'

'That's right, sir. You're Judge Cunningham, aren't you?'

'I thought I could not be mistaken. Constance Lafarge has your picture. I knew your father; he was a fine lawyer. They tell me you spoke very well to the Woman's Club at Farleigh, though you'll never be the speaker your father was.'

'Or the man, either, sir. May I present my wife?'

Judy, as innocent-looking as an Easter-card angel, extended her hand demurely.

'How do you do, Judge Cunningham? And does Mrs Lafarge still carry his picture? How devoted of her!'

'I expressed myself badly, I fear. The, photograph is in a brochure issued for publicity purposes by the Boylston Lecture Bureau. Young man, I congratulate you! May I say that your wife is charming, entirely, charming?, You are bound to the dress rehearsal, I should imagine?'

'Indeed we are!' Judy assured him. 'May we sit with you in the train, Judge Cunningham?'

'I should be honoured, Mrs Knox, if you don't mind the smoker.'

`Oh, no! We'd both prefer it. Which way, please?'

Not unceremoniously Judge Graham Cunningham ushered them into the last car, a gloomy one only sparsely filled with depressed Sundayites. Knox pushed over the back of a seat for-three to get more room. Judy and Judge Cunningham sat down facing forward, with Knox opposite them.

A rush of last-moment passengers poured along the platform and flowed in. Only a few minutes late the train rolled out, rattling through its cavern and presently into the open. The spring night had turned from grey to black. Rows of lighted windows twinkled past. A conductor stalked the aisle, conscientiously calling the name of each station and mentioning its successor. -

'One-Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street! Next stop Mount Vernon:

Constraint held the three Richbell-bound passengers. Knox had offered cigarettes, which both Judy and the judge accepted. For a time they smoked in' silence, listening to the jolt of wheels.

`Are things going well at the theatre, sir?' asked Knox.

`How are the players?' `Somewhat jumpy, as an amateur would expect. I am assured, however, that it will be all right on the night.'

'We understand, sir, that you yourself have added a number of imaginative touches to the production.'

Judge Cunningham considered this, running his little finger along his moustache.

`Without undue vanity,' he said, `I think I may agree with that. The fencing has been well rehearsed; stabbing Mercutio is a tricky business. The retainers of both Capulet and Montague, although unnamed characters don't fight, will all wear swords and carry slung crossbows.'

`Crossbows?'

`That surprises you? It is a little suggestion of my own, for which I believe I can find historical authority. What do you know of ancient weapons, Philip?'

`Not a great deal, I. must admit. I know something of the crossbow, of course: a very old and dreaded weapon. But it was still generally

used in Europe, I believe, at well past the middle of the sixteenth century.'

'Precisely!' Judge Cunningham almost purred. 'A short whalebone bow was mounted crosswise on a wooden stock, the horns of the bow so stiff it required a crank on the stock to drawback the cords.' You fired it by, touching a trigger. Though slow to load and, of no great range compared with the longbow, it was yet immensely powerful. It fired a short iron bolt ending in a square head with four murderous points. At medium distances it would pierce plate-armour.

'An old weapon, as you say: a dreaded weapon. As early as 1139 the Church - the Popish church, that is, not your father's presbyterian one - prohibited its use (except against infidels, of course) as "a thing hateful to God and unfit for Christians". One clause of Magna Carta in 1215 forbade the employment of foreign crossbowmen in England.' 'But-!'

'I refer to the warbow, of course. There were other and lighter types (used in hunting, for instance) which projected missiles with iron heads but wooden shafts. These missiles were called bolts or darts. Only the warbow fired the terrible four-pointed shaft called a quarrel. On the continent of Europe Italian crossbowmen remained dreaded troops until the improvement of firearms made them obsolete. In Romeo and Juliet tonight you will see authentic warbows of the sixteenth century. They are not stage properties. They are the real thing.'

'Next stop Columbus Avenue!'

'Do I sound bloodthirsty? I am not. Let's look at the play itself.'

Judge Cunningham dropped his cigarette on the floor and trod on it. He addressed Knox, but he looked oftener at Judy. The rosy, quizzical old face had an almost Puckish quality.

'Shakespeare, it seems probable,' he said, 'wrote Romeo and Juliet in 1595. It was first printed in corrupt form two years later. But he took his story from Bandello's Italian romance, published in English in 1567. If we take the action of the play as occurring about the middle of the sixteenth century, what follows?'

'With regard to weapons?'

'For the moment with regard to weapons, yes.'

`You tell us, judge Cunningham!'

`At this date,' pursued the judge, `the weapon we now know as the gun or musket, meaning an unrifled barrel, was being developed in various ways and under various names as the hackbut, the hakbusche, the harquebus, the arquebus, and so on according to country.' Here he almost winked at Judy. `But it was primitive, it was heavy, it had to be supported on a stand; even to fire it (I say nothing of loading) required a slow match wrapped around the musketeer's arm. Do you follow me?'

`I see,' said Knox. 'Montague and Capulet keep armed retainers, who may meet at any moment in a deadly brawl. If they've got any sense they'll knock off a few enemies at a distance before coming to grips with sword and dagger. Will they choose the fairly awkward crossbow or the impossibly awkward musket? Is that it?'

`As between arquebus and crossbow,' declared judge Cunningham, `I think we must rule in favour of the latter.'

`Next stop Pelham!' -

`My thesis is arguable,' Judge Cunningham continued, as the train gathered speed again. `But we may start an argument about any weapon, from the first stone hatchet to the hydrogen bomb. Do you still think me bloodthirsty, Mrs Knox?'

`I'm afraid I do, rather,' said Judy, who had never looked prettier. `And yet it is exciting!'

`It's exciting, all right. But it won't be so very funny,' Knox pointed out, `if somebody tries out the crossbows. Can they be fired, sir?'

`Oh, they can be fired.'

`Ha ha ha.'

`They have been fitted with modern cords; there are plenty of bolts. But they are not required in the play, and I have carefully instructed Mr Plunkett that nobody is to fool with them. The only one who causes me apprehension (o temporal o mores) is Mr Plunkett himself.'

`You know, judge Cunningham, you'll get on like a house afire with Dr Gideon Fell.'

`I sincerely trust' so. And now, members of the ... and now, son of

my old friend and his wife, shall we leave the weapons and consider the characters?'

`Well, sir?'

`Romeo and Juliet is set in Verona. Where is Verona, and what may we deduce from that fact?'

`Stop a bit!' breathed Judy. Her gaze had been fixed, out of the window and far away. Now she swung back. 'I think I see it!'

'Yes, Mrs Knox?'

'Verona is in northern Italy, where the people may be fair-haired and even tall. All Italians aren't Neapolitans, though that's how we think of them. Juliet is usually played as a brunette. Do you mean she should be played as a little blonde?'

'She maybe played as a little blonde. Perhaps by temperament she ought to be. It has been stated that no actress should essay the part until she is too old to play it. I can't agree; I find Juliet hardly so complicated. Thomas Bailey Aldrich said it best. "Her instincts required curbing; her heart made too many beats to the minute." However! With regard to the Margery Vane Players, my dear, your instincts have struck closer home than you know.'

'How?'

'It is true that Anne Winfield, though of sound AngloSaxon stock, has hair of raven black and dark blue eyes that might almost be Celtic. Whereas young Anthony Ferrara, who will play Romeo and is in fact second generation Italian ..',

'Play Romeo?' exploded Knox. 'But what about Barry Plunkett? What about your star?'

Judge Cunningham held up his hand.

'It is Mr Plunkett's own choice. He refuses to touch the part of Romeo, whom he describes (unjustly, I submit) as a wishy-washy poop. He will, play the hell-roaring; Mercutio, a role he greatly enjoys. Miss Winfield and Mr Ferrara . .

Judge Cunningham enlarged on this theme, sometimes cryptically, as the towns of Pelham, New Rochelle, and Larchmont sped past and receded,

`Mr Ferrara, second generation Italian, really is tall and fair-haired. Both are serious-minded young people, the real type of today's youth. I hate the word "dedicated", which smacks of official red tape and bosh. But you may use it if you like. Anne Winfield, of course, is a very healthy young woman. If we examine their characters in the light of Romeo and Juliet's characters, we are led irresistibly to-

`Mamaroneck!

`-to the conclusion,' said Judge Cunningham, `that each can submerge himself or herself in what Shakespeare called for. If we had no more serious worries than that'

`Have you ally serious worries, sir?'

`Judson Lafarge has. Lafarge, like myself an unsalaried consultant, acts as business manager. Do you know him, young man?'

`Phil knows his wife,' said Judy. 'He knows Mrs Lafarge very well. They're meeting us at the station, Phil says.'

'Ah, then you'll be in good hands. I myself must rush off for the moment, I fear. I have been at the Lotos Club all day; I must go home to receive an important telephone call before the rehearsal, but you may expect me, back.

`Yes, Lafarge has worries. Stagehands!' intoned the judge. 'Stagehands! Musicians! Tramps!'; '``Tramps?'

`When we took over the theatre, it was still winter weather. Tramps or other undesirables, we discovered, would sometimes get in and sleep there. The stage is fitted with ingenious contrivances, including some almost magically engineered trap doors., Lafarge thinks there must be a secret entrance to the theatre itself, since we could find no signs of breaking or entering There was and is one persistent offender in this respect. Weary Willie ... I think, Mrs Knox, you must be English?'

`I am.'

`In America, my dear, Weary Willie is a generic name for tramp. But this man's name does actually seem to be Willie; call him a hanger-on and ne'er-do-well rather than a tramp. He is also a lush or drunkard,'

`Yes; I know the term.'

`Regularly he fills up on Sneaky Pete, a cheap wine of the raw variety, and goes to sleep it off at the Mask. How does he get' in? Nobody knows. He has been jailed repeatedly, but it does no good; he always comes back. The Richbell police are much too easygoing: they just lock him up overnight and release him in the morning. Willie has never done any damage, let it be Admitted. But the thing is no joke, I assure you! And where does this bring us?'

`Richbell' bawled the conductor.

The train halted on its overhead bridge above the town. A soft breeze blew along the platform. Below shone the lights of Richbell Avenue, a broad street curving away half a mile to join the Boston Post Road east of Mamaroneck.

On the platform stood Connie Lafarge, handsome and sleek and stoutening under blue-rinsed hair,, with a thick, round-bodied, round-faced man who had removed his hat to mop a bald brow.

With ten courtly words judge Cunningham faded away.

Connie rushed up to Knox, threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him on the cheek. He in turn introduced Judy, but had no time to observe the effect on anybody; both Connie and her husband gabbled with ill-suppressed excitement.

As the hands of the station clock stood at a quarter to nine, the two newcomers were hustled downstairs to the waiting Cadillac. Judson Lafarge drove them roaring out of the station yard, east along a deserted Richbell Avenue with tall street-lamps and mostly dark shop-fronts.

Some two hundred yards away the Mask Theatre loomed up, square and massive, on the left or south side of the Avenue. Beyond it lay a drugstore, dark, then two shops, also dark, then, at the intersection of Elm Street, -a semi-lighted building whose neon sign glowed with an impressionistic tree below the red and green letters Lone Tree Tavern.

`It's quite a respectable place,' cried Connie, for some reason pointing to the tavern as they hustled out of the car before the theatre.

Not yet, had the marquee been illuminated to show Margery Vane Players in black letters against a white background. But there were signs of life inside. Judson Lafarge stamping, led the little procession through a kind of shallow vestibule behind whose ticket window a stolid-looking nineteen-year-old-girl- `Nancy Trimble, who helps us

out,' Connie explained awaited advance bookings. Then they entered the foyer, which would lead in turn to the auditorium.

If the foyer had been better lighted, Knox thought, it might have reminded him a very little of the main lounge aboard R M S Illyria. It was pink and white and gold, with the deepest of carpets, but so dimly, illuminated that his three companions became indistinct shapes.

One shape could not be called indistinct. Against the pink rear wall, with swing doors to the auditorium on either side, hung a full-length painting of Margery Vane as Juliet. A concealed yellow glow at the top of the frame brought out the beauty of her face, the wide-spaced eyes and broad mouth, the figure in virginal white. On the wall just below it, vertically and head upwards, hung a polished crossbow with a wooden stock inlaid in ivory. An iron bolt or quarrel hung at either side.

Judson Lafarge stamped to the middle of the foyer, fanned himself with his hat, and took an oratorical stance.

'Listen!' he said. 'If I'd known last Christmas what I know now, would I have let anybody con me into this? Not on your Aunt Fanny I wouldn't! Retired, am I? Hobby, is it? Better just jump off the Empire State Building and get it over with.'

'Now, Jud!' fluttered Connie. 'It'd be good for you, dear, you know it'd be good for you, if only you didn't get so excited.'

'Excited, for God's sake? Sure I'm excited! We'll go broke, d'ye get me? B for busted, r for ruin, o for overdrawn, k for kaput, and e for extermination! And that damn woman-'

He stabbed his finger at the portrait. Knox strolled towards it.

'Her picture got here, I see.'

Connie did a kind of dance.

'Her' picture got here? Oh, mercy on us, if it were only her picture! Don't you see what's the matter with us, Phil? Don't you understand at all? She's here!'

`HERE? But you said-'

`Yes, I know!' wailed Connie. `I said, we all said, and that's what we thought. Until late this afternoon. And then there she was at Newark Airport, phoning everybody. I can't make out whether this was just a sudden impulse, or whether she's planned it all along. But she is here!'

"What does she want, Connie? She doesn't want to play Juliet, does she?"

`No, thank God! She wants to see the dress rehearsal. Alone in a box, if you please, because she can't bear anyone's company when she's watching, something she likes. Except for people connected with this, no guests but five she's personally approved. And the rehearsal must be held up., until she's good and ready to see it.'

`When you say she's here, Connie, do you mean she's here in the theatre now?'

`Not at the moment, no. She and, Miss Harkness and Mr Porter are having a bite to eat at the Lone Tree Tavern. Jud dear, don't you think you'd better. ?'

Judson Lafarge nodded. Fanning himself with his hat, he advanced towards Knox:

`Look!' he began. `You're a stranger, I know. But you're not quite that either. Connie's talked so much about you, and gone on so long about you being her childhood sweetheart-'

Knox glanced at Judy, who was casually contemplating vacancy.

‘-well, I kind of think of you as being in the family. May I tell you something?'

`Of course.'

`Well, look!' Steam began to gather. 'If there are sixteen chairs to be moved, one stagehand can move 'em. If there are seventeen chairs to be moved, he's got to have another man to help him. There's the guy on the panel working the lights. You pay him five-twenty an hour and guarantee four hours a day. Then there are the musicians. If I told you everything about the God-damn musicians...!' He was not a bad fellow, Knox; knew; he was a thoroughly good fellow with a load of worry. `Mr Lafarge

`Call me Jud.'

`All right, Jud. I sympathize with you in your labour troubles, being myself an old eighteenth-century conservative. But what's this got to do with Margery Vane? She doesn't make the union rules, you know.'

`No, that's another thing. Shall I tell him, Connie?'

`Yes, dear, please!'

Again their host stabbed his finger at the portrait.

`I can't figure her,' he said; `I just can't figure her. Last January she handed over a check for fifty thousand bucks without batting an eyelid. You'd think she'd be staying in New York: at the Carlyle, maybe, or some place like that. Oh, no! She and her two stooges are at the John J. Pershing Hotel in White Plains, because hotels in town are "too expensive". The prices are murder nowadays, I know; but that's the way the cookie crumbles and we've got to take it. Besides, she'll pay almost as much at the Pershing without. getting the same thing for her money. That damn woman'

`Jud, be fair!' Connie admonished in a pacifying voice. `She just wants to be near the theatre. The Pershing's a very good hotel. And after all, in her way, she is something of a great lady.'

`Not to me she isn't,' retorted Mr Lafarge. `She's got the Indian-sign on me, and I admit it; I haven't said boo to her so far. But there's an end to everything, and then I've had it.

- `I'm not complaining too much, mind! She's put so much dough into this business she's got a right to call the shots. She wants something done, we do it. She doesn't want us to hire somebody, we don't hire him. It's the dough talking, as it always does.

`I just wish she wouldn't talk to people like God Almighty issuing orders from the mountain. Not an hour ago she came charging in here and lectured everybody to a fare-ye-well I thought Anne Winfield was going to faint.'

'Jud,' cried Connie, `do please control yourself.'

`And it's not that she's yelling for so much either. Look, Phil' She wants a box to herself? OK: she can take her pick of four boxes, each with a bolt on the door so she can lock herself in. I never could figure why old Adam Cayley put bolts on all the box doors, and a sofa in

each of 'em too, unless he thought the best customers would bring their girlfriends for a little. ..'

`Jud!' Connie said warningly.

`It's all right, honey; I'm not going to use any crude words.

She wants the show held up until she can put herself outside some food and a slug of booze? O K too! We suit Her Royal Highness and here's looking at you, if Barry Plunkett can just sit on the actors and the God-damn musicians. Finally, there's the guest list.'

`Guest list?' repeated Knox.

`You heard what Connie said. Five guests. Listen to this!'

Mr Lafarge mopped a sleeve across his bald brow. Reaching into his inside breast pocket, he took out a notebook and opened it.

'I'll read it out,' continued the harassed impresario, `just as she dictated it and more or less' as I wrote it down. "Invited by Judge Cunningham, approved by Margery Vane. Dr Gideon Fell. District Attorney Herman Gulick. Lieutenant Carlo Spinelli, White Plains Police."

`Who's Lieutenant Carlo Spinelli?'

'You heard, Phil. All I know beyond that is what Gulick told me on the phone. "One of our educated policemen; NYU, '41. He won't get in your way, though he thinks I'm always getting in his." Hold on to your hat; now; here we go again. "Invited by Constance Lafarge, approved by Margery' Vane. Philip Knox and girlfriend."

'That's all; that's the whole Goddamn shunting match. We'd already invited some friends of our own, but did we have to cancel it? Don't answer that. She's got a great yen for you, Phil; agreed without a murmur. I wrote down "girlfriend" because that's what Connie told me and that's what we thought. We didn't know you were bringing your wife.'

Connie ran forward.

'Phil, you sly one, we didn't even know you had a wife! Not one word have you breathed about it since you've been in this country. She's a dear and we love her, but - honestly and truly, now ...'

`Are we really married, do you mean?' asked Judy.

'No, dear, of course not; lots of girls won't wear rings.

But - how long have you been married?'

'Just under twenty-seven years.'

'Twenty-seven years?' Connie rolled up her eyes. Twenty seven years, did you say? All joking apart, now surely that must be a mistake?'

`It's no mistake, - Mrs Lafarge. Why must it be a mistake?'

'Call me Connie. You're Judy, aren't you? And why must it be a mistake? For one thing, dear, Phil would have mentioned anybody as pretty as you. For another thing, if you'll excuse my saying so, you scarcely look old enough to ... to ...'

'To do what? demanded Knox. `If you mean what I think you mean, Connie, you'd get one memorable surprise.'

'Mr Lafarge, Phil,' Judy said demurely, 'is much too civilized to use vulgar language in the presence of his wife. Don't you think it's an example you might well follow?' -

`Who's using vulgar language, young hoity-toity? I only said-'

'We all heard what you said. I know what you meant.'

Judson Lafarge waved his hat in the gloom.

'Well, Jesus H. Christ,' he roared, `but is everybody out to raise hell like Her Royal Highness on the rampage? No offence, Judy, but I know that tone in a woman's voice too. And, speaking of Her Royal Highness, hadn't you two better have a look at the theatre before she comes back and raises hell all over again?

'This is quite a place, this is. Don't ever believe it's haunted; that'll only be Weary Willy. It's even got a green room, shades of the past: though they use the green room, mostly, for a continuous crap game. There are two aisles down through the house. You see those swing doors on either side of Her Royal Highness's picture? If you and Connie take the aisle on the right, Judy, and Phil and I take the aisle on the left...'

'And not only did he fail to mention you, Judy dear, but he didn't

say one word about what happened aboard ship, when some crazy steward took a shot at Lady Severn. She told us, though, as soon as she got here.'

'For God's sake, Connie,' yelled her husband, 'do you hear what I'm trying to tell you?'

'Yes, dear, if you'll try not to fidget so much. Right-hand door, and let's hope things will be all right. This way.'

Ushering Knox to the left-hand door, which was padded in brown leather, Judson Lafarge pushed it open and let it swing to behind them as they entered.

Though only a few of the house lights were on, it was brighter than the foyer. If the foyer had seemed a gloom of rose and gilt mingled with white, this larger cavern loomed up as little more than dull crimson and old gold. A breath of antiquity trailed through its paint-and-powder smell. And once more menace sprang up.

Some distance down the slope of the aisle, with rows of red plush seats at either side, a new goblin stood facing them. The man was little above average height, though width of shoulder and narrowness of waist made him seem taller. Mahogany-hued hair curled tightly against his head. He wore a light blue doublet slashed with silver, and dark blue padded trunk hose. At his left hip hung a double-edged ringhilt rapier. At his right hip was a main-gauche, the left hand dagger, with curved shell-guard for fingers and wrist.

But the newcomers hardly glanced at sword or dagger. Against his right shoulder the goblin figure pressed the butt of the crossbow that was trained on them, its horns drawn back by the windlass and a four-pointed bolt in its firinggroove. His left hand supported the stock; his right forefinger was on the trigger.

Then a voice boomed at them.

'Hold!' it called. 'Hold, I say, and let no varlet stir!' Judson Lafarge hurled his hat over several rows of seats. 'Look, Barry, are you nuts or something? Go easy with that dingus, can't you? Put the damn thing down! Judge Cunningham's already told you.'. 'Stand still!' intoned, the goblin. 'Don't move, either of you, and I guarantee no ill effects. I more than guarantee it.

Behold!'

There was a vicious snap. Cords banged across the head of the bow. Something flashed in the air a few inches wide of Knox's left ear, and whacked into the wall behind him. Then he whirled round. The iron bolt, perhaps a trifle under or over a foot long, had buried half its length in the wall beside one of the framed playbills hanging there.

`You see?' inquired the goblin in a startlingly normal voice. `I was afraid somebody'd step into the line of fire. But it's all right now.'

`It's all right, is it?' bawled Judson Lafarge. `Now look, William Tell-!'

`True for you, Father Jud,' said the goblin. `True for you, beshrew me, and how right you are. Put an apple on your head and I'll skewer it. Yes, of course I mean the apple! I've been practising with this thing. I can hit a cockroach on the wall; and, for all the cleaning that's been done, there are still a few of 'em. Let me show you.'

Mr Barry Plunkett, actor manager of the Margery Vane Players, straightened up. Holding the crossbow by the leather, strap with which it could be slung on a wearer's back, he sauntered towards them.

His age might have been thirty-five or older. Swaggering, good-natured, inspired of the devil, he wore full face makeup whose orange-pink colours glowed like a mask.

'So you've been practising, have you?' demanded Judson Lafarge.

`Yes. As I say-'

`That's fine; that's just dandy. Now listen to me, Robin Hood, and get this straight. In the play there're only three of you who do any serious sword-fighting.'

`Romeo, Tybalt, and Mercutio. Respectively Tony Ferrara, Lee Huxley, and your obedient servant. Do you think I don't know that?'

Wait! There's one other guy, the hero's' friend. He never gets much involved. But he walks in at the very beginning, when some stooges of the Hatfields and the McCoys have just started to mix it. He hits up the swords and tells 'em to knock it off before they all land in the pokey. This guy

`Benvolio,' said Mr Plunkett, `played by Ben Radford. They all think it's funny, for a reason which escapes me, that Ben Radford should

play Benvolio. All right! Judge

Cunningham wants real swords and daggers, from his own collection, and so do I. So do Tony and Lee and Ben. What's the matter, Father Jud? Are you protesting?'

`No; who am I to protest? My job is just to take care of, the dough and keep you loonies out of bankruptcy. But look, Barry! You four aren't supposed to wear crossbows, any more than old Montague or old Capulet wear 'em. What the hell are you doing with that one?'

`I borrowed it from Jake Harpenden, who plays Sampson in the first scene. And I'm pretty damn good with it too. Look here.'

Crossbow over his left arm, Barry Plunkett marched to the alley which ran along the back of the auditorium between the last row of seats and the rear wall. Here he indicated the iron bolt half buried in the wall beside one of the playbills.

`If you'll notice,' he said, `there's a gold-painted rosette here, and I hit the rosette smack in the middle. You see?'

With a powerful jerk of his right hand he wrenched the bolt out of the wall. A trail of white plaster dust ran down.

`So now,' said Mr Lafarge,; `you want to smash up the place, do you? What are the insurance people going to say?'

`What are we going to claim from 'em? There's no harm done. Stick some putty in that hole, paint it over, and it's as good as new.'

`You're crazy,' raved the other; `you're stark, staring nuts! If you had to start wrecking something it cost a fortune to redecorate, why didn't you just bust hell out of the playbills?'

`The playbills? God forbid! There are never any pockets in these Spokeshave clothes,' Barry Plunkett slapped at his hips, `so I can't carry a lighter or matches. But I can see well enough: look here! "Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, March 6th, 1901. Adam Cayley in Cyrano de Bergerac, by Edmond Rostand." The one on the right is much older. "Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. For the Benefit of Miss Kelly. On Wednesday Next, May 23rd, 1827 ..." ' '

Crossbow in one hand and quarrel in the other, he stalked back to join his companions to the head of the aisle.

`When this theatre was still a cinema, I'm told, those playbills were wrapped in tissue paper and stored at Adam Cayley's old house. Touch those, you ruddy Philistine? What kind of vandal do you take me for?'

Judson Lafarge stopped simmering and woke up.

`I'm afraid I'm getting absent-minded. Barry Plunkett, shake hands with Philip Knox, the writer. Have you heard of him?'

`Heard of him, bejasus?' The actor looked at Knox.

`There's one biography you wrote, Henry o f Navarre, that makes me proud to shake your hand.'

He dropped both crossbow and quarrel to do so. Then his fine voice filled the theatre.

`Now glory to the Lord of Hosts, in Whom all glories are,

And glory to our sovereign liege, King Henry of Navarre!'

With no change of expression, glancing round, he added:

`Enter ladies! Your obedient servant salutes you!'

All three looked. A little way down the other aisle, beyond many rows of red plush seats, Connie and Judy had been watching in a kind of horror. First Judy, then Connie, began to edge her way along a row of upended seats towards the three miscreants at the head of this aisle.

`I told you I didn't like those crossbows,' said Connie, `and I still don't. I don't like them at all.'

`I don't mind the crossbows so much,' said Judy. `It's the swords and daggers that frighten me.'

`You never said a truer word, Judy dear. Men have no sense.'

`Here's one man,' declared Judson Lafarge, smiting his own chest, `who's got to have the sense for everybody. But it's time for the amenities, I guess. Mr Plunkett, this is Mrs Knox. Barry, meet Judy.'

`This little girl is Mrs Knox? It's a great pleasure, my dear. I was just speaking to your husband about Henry of Navarre.'

`The one who said Paris was a mess? Yes, I heard you. Phil has a passion for using catchy pieces of doggerel as a peg to hang his books

on. At the moment he's got a thing about the Civil War.'

'Which civil war, me dear?' asked the actor, deliberately infecting his speech with Dublin accent. 'The civil war of the bloody English, 1641-44, or the American one of more recent date?'

'The American one, I'm afraid. He's absolutely obsessed with Stonewall Jackson.'

'Ah, well; he could do worse. But evidently your husband's quite a lad. Connie's told us how she and Philip Knox used to carry on under the moon.'

'No, really, now!' Connie almost simpered. 'I'm sure I can't think why you bring that up! It's all so very long ago; we've both forgotten.'

'I'll bet he hasn't,' retorted Judy. 'Don't let him get you into a corner, Connie, whatever happens. The man's practically a psychiatric case.'

Barry Plunkett looked at Knox.

'Having trouble with this one, old boy?' he asked 'sympathetically. 'Don't let it worry you; we all have trouble with 'em. But now, with your permission, I shall try to raise the minds of these people to a somewhat higher level. I would lay a small bet, Mr Knox, that the man who wrote Henry of Navarre himself has some knowledge of fencing?'

'I've fenced a little, yes. But only with modern foils. I never quite followed this business of the sword and the main gauche.'

'It's tricky, it's very tricky.'

'In the sixteenth century, as I understand it,' Knox went on, 'the only stroke permitted with the sword was a cut. That entailed two movements, arm back and over like this,' he illustrated, 'and left you wide open.'

'True, O learned one!'

'You could use almost any sort of foul cut you liked: witness the coup de Jarnac, for instance. But you must never thrust except with the dagger, or the spectators would pitch in and kill you themselves. All right! Now imagine I'm here with a sword in my right hand and a main-gauche in my - left. You stand facing me armed in the same way.'

`Fair enough, old boy! I'm imagining it!'

`You lash out a savage cut with a heavy double-edged blade. I can parry with the dagger; my wrist and fingers are protected by its curved guard.' An old excitement had gripped Knox. `But wouldn't a really vicious cut (from an arm like yours) be apt to paralyse my hand or wrist or arm when I did catch, the blade? Or, in the event of your sword being very sharp, mightn't it even shear through the steel of the main-gauche? It's easy enough, fencing-style, to parry a dagger-thrust with a sword. But how do you conveniently , parry a sword-cut with a dagger? Is there an answer to that one?'

Clearly the same excitement had seized' Barry Plunkett.

`Yes, there's an answer,' he said, `and this is a, man after my own heart!'

'Well?'

`The book you want is Castle*, the only complete treatise ever compiled. It's not easy to find, though there's a copy in Judge. Cunningham's library, But never mind the book, I'll do better than .that; I'll show you. Wait here just two ticks; stay where you are and I'll come straight back and show you!'

`Barry, you nut out of Matteawan,' yelled Judson Lafarge, `what do you think you're up to now?'

The other paid no attention. Snatching up crossbow and bolt, he bounded off down the aisle towards the stage. All eyes turned to follow him. Swerving left at the orchestra pit, he made for the iron door or pass door which led back-stage beyond the left of the proscenium arch. Tall dull crimson curtains hid the stage with their folds. Plunkett in blue and silver had just reached the pass door when it was opened for him.

Out stepped a small, shapely young woman in white, with dark hair confined in a silver net. Her own' makeup glowed despite poor light. Hers was a face of great spirituality; it might have been painted by Burne-Jones. Knox, who could not see her well, had a nagging impression of having seen her somewhere before. Every word carried clearly.

`Barry-!'

'Out of my way, poppet; I'm on a very serious errand!'

`Barry, it's five minutes after nine!' When are we going to start?'

Mr Plunkett, though in haste, was not unkindly.

`Whenever Lady Bountiful gets back from the pub. It's bound to be soon; she can't eat all the food in Westchester County. Go back and watch the crap game, puffin; everything's under control.'

**Schools and Masters of Fence, by Egerton Castle (London: George Bell & Sons, 1893).*

`But I'm so horribly nervous!'

`It'd be a bad sign if you weren't. Back to the crap game, now, and keep your pants quiet! Here!'

Seizing her wrist, he dragged her inside and closed the door.

Knox looked round. `That was Miss Winfield, I suppose?

'That was our Anne,' bleated Connie. `She looks so very refined, too! But what is Barry up to?'

Judy lifted a shoulder and turned away. She said nothing; it was as though she had determined to say nothing whatever happened.

They were not left long in doubt. Hardly a minute elapsed before the pass door opened to readmit Barry Plunkett, who raced along the front of the orchestra pit and back up the aisle. In addition to the sword and dagger he wore in light shagreen sheaths, he now carried an unsheathed double-edged rapier with a ring-hilt, and a main-gauche similar to his own. Both had been scoured with woodash and polished with emery cloth; light ran along the blades.

Knox advanced to meet him halfway down the aisle. Judson Lafarge uttered an explosive groan.

`I was afraid of this!' he said. `Now look, Jarnac-!'

'You're not going to use those things, are you?' wailed Connie. `The edges aren't sharp, but they could do a lot of damage. Oh, Jud, it's awful!'

The actor swept her a great bow.

'Accept my assurance, madam! It shall be done in slow motion; nobody's going to get hurt. What do you say, learned magister?'

`At your service!' returned Knox.

`Catch?' inquired Barry Plunkett, holding up the main-gauche.

`Right!'

`Right!' said Mr Plunkett, and tossed the dagger to him.

Knox caught it and transferred it to his left hand. Next he caught the sword, which was rather heavy but beautifully balanced.

Barry Plunkett whipped out his own sword and dagger. 'Magister,' he said, 'you're right. You're absolutely right!'

In the sixteenth century, before thrusts became legal at the beginning of the seventeenth, swordplay was largely an acrobatic business. They never did try to parry a cut with the dagger. They just jumped back and bored in again. Now, then! Take an overarm cut at my head or shoulder - but slowly, mind, or you'll have Connie in fits! - and I'll show you the trick. Got it?'

`Got it!'

You had to stand full face for use of both weapons; there could be no standing sideways as in modern fencing. But instinctively Knox advanced on his right foot. His right arm swept back and over; the cut fell with calculated slowness. But it would not have touched the other man in any case. Barry Plunkett sprang, back like a great cat, and was instantly forward again with both points at guard.

`That's how they're doing it tonight. Or some of it. You see, a lot of rattling and banging looks better to the audience, so there are plenty of cuts parried with the dagger. It's quite easy unless somebody slashes like hell. Shall we try a passado or two and show these people? Only gently, of course; like light sparring with gloves ...?'

`Yes, I know that light sparring. business!' said Judson Lafarge. 'One guy bits a little too hard, without meaning to; the other guy hits back a little harder; and then all of a sudden - pow!'

`Jud, stop them!' screamed Connie. 'Aren't you going to stop them?'

'They're BOTH as crazy ,as bedbugs. But it is kind of interesting.'

`Interesting, for heaven's sake? Men have no sense.'

`Now, then, magister!' pursued Barry Plunkett. - 'I'm Mercutio,

you're Tybalt, this aisle is the "public place" of the text - "Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk?" ' he suddenly flung at Knox.

` "What wouldst thou have of me?" ' Knox flung back.

"Good King of Cats, nothing but one of your nine lives; that I mean to make bold withal and as you shall use me hereafter, dry-beat the rest of the eight." Have at you!"

The 'have at you!' was not in the text. Judy still said nothing. Mr Plunkett hurled a forehand cut at Knox's head.

Knox parried high, feeling a jar but not a numbing jar, and threw back a cut at the left shoulder which was parried in the same way.

Out flashed the actor's dagger, carried aside by a wrist turn of the rapier. Knox's own dagger-thrust in riposte Plunkett also caught and turned wide.

Heated blood had leaped into both faces. Knox saw light on the sword as his adversary once more slashed for the head; he whacked the blade away rather than parried. Using the same main-gauche, trying to thrust short but losing his head completely, he went out at full-length lunge for the right side of the actor's chest. Barry Plunkett made a great backwards jump out of range.

Then they both stood motionless, breathing quickly. The dust rose about them from the carpet. Through the theatre rang a clear, beautiful voice.

`Go to it, gentlemen, go to it! Out, steel, and make your passado! Ah, bravely done!'

At the top of the aisle stood Margery Vane.

6

MASKS IN PLACE

'BUT THAT will do now, I think,' Margery Vane added.

She stood alone at the head of the-aisle, there being no sign of Miss Harkness or Lawrence Porter. She wore a lowcut evening gown of shimmering silver, above which sleek shoulders gleamed. If it was not entirely appropriate to the time or the occasion, her personality made it seem so. The beautiful face was a trifle flushed, from anticipation or some other cause. Over her left arm she carried a lightweight half

length wrap of black velvet, and a black velvet handbag with a diamond clasp. Then she seemed to realize she was unaccompanied. .

`Bess!' she said over her shoulder. 'Bess, where are you?'

There was no reply.

`Your servant, Lady Severn!' called Barry Plunkett.

He returned rapier and main-gauche each to its scabbard. Taking the other sword and dagger, which Knox held out hilt foremost, he tucked both under his left arm. He addressed Knox with obvious friendliness, but in so low and ventriloquial a tone that the words did not carry.

`Good exercise!' he said. 'In that last exchange, though, didn't things get a bit out of hand?'

`Yes. I'm sorry.'

`No; I'm sorry. I'd already lost my own head and hoped you didn't notice. Confidentially, between ourselves, how old are you?'

`The same age as the lady there. Fifty-four, fifty-five in July.'

`Are you, bejasus? If you've never: done any sword-and-dagger work before, I'd hate to take you on when you'd had a little practice!'

'I'm no athlete, I'm afraid.'

`You're fast on your feet, old boy, bloody fast. And there's nothing wrong with your eye either.'

Here Mr Plunkett straightened up and addressed everybody.

'I like this bloke,' he announced, walloping Knox across the shoulders.' 'I like his style. When I challenged him to a go with real swords and daggers, he didn't wonder if he'd get hurt or instantly ask whether he was covered by insurance. No; he just took the pig-stickers and waded in. There ought to be more of that spirit in the world. I tell you, I like this bloke!'

`We're all rather fond of him,' assented Margery Vane. Gracefully she moved down the aisle. 'Philip!' she added. 'Dear Philip!'

Approaching Knox, rising on tiptoe, she fastened both arms tightly round his neck and kissed him on the lips with some intimacy.

(What ho!' muttered Barry Plunkett.)

Judy said nothing.

`If you'll just excuse us,' Judson Lafarge proclaimed heartily, 'I'd better have a word with the good people backstage. Come along, Connie.'

Touching Connie's arm, he guided her down the slope towards the stage and the pass door.

`Wants to break up the crap game,' said Barry Plunkett. Aloud: `Any final instructions, Lady Severn?'

`I think not, Mr Plunkett. They may begin when I give the signal. Meantime, however ... Ah, there you are, Bess! These April nights can turn awfully chilly when you least expect it. Did you bring my coat?'

An answer was unnecessary. Miss Harkness, carrying the other woman's mink coat on a hanger as she had so often done aboard ship, emerged from the foyer. The light glimmered on her glasses and her own not unpleasing face; she herself wore a lightweight dark coat and a tightly fitting hat.

A new atmosphere, not an easy one, had blown in with Margery Vane.

`Meantime, as I was saying-!' She stopped. Her eye fell on Judy, who had stiffened all over. `Surely you and I have met before, have we not?'

'I - I hardly think so, Lady Severn. You see ...'

`And yet I'm sure of it! What do you say, Bess?'

`You haven't really got a good memory for faces, Margery,' answered Miss Harkness. `That clipping somebody sent you from Richbell-'

`Oh, the press cutting!'

`You didn't even recognize the same man on the Illyria. And I didn't tell you; I couldn't!'

`I think I remember this girl, though. Stop; I have it!' She looked at Judy. `Your name is Dorothy, I think?'

'No, it is not! That's to say: my middle name is Dorothy, yes. But nobody calls me that, and I've never used the name myself.'

'Haven't you, my dear? Well, well, we must talk of this later! What is your last name, if I may ask?' 'My last name is Knox'

'Your sister?' Margery Vane demanded of the still embarrassed historian.

'My wife.'

'Your wife?' There was a slight pause. 'Well, as I say, we can talk of this presently. Meanwhile, I must choose the box from which I am to watch the performance.'

They were all standing beneath the overhang of the dress circle well above their heads. Barry Plunkett waved his hand towards the stage. As though in response to the gesture, more house lights flashed on.

Clearly they could see the great proscenium arch, surrounded by, a frieze of gilt figures and topped by twin masks of tragedy and comedy. The crimson curtains trembled a little. To the left of the proscenium arch rose up two boxes; the lower one at the height of the dress circle, the upper one just above it. Two identical boxes, to the right of the proscenium arch, flaunted gilt arabesques along their curves.

'Lady Severn!'

'I am listening, Mr Plunkett.'

'Well, there you are. As Father Jud told you earlier this evening, there are four boxes to choose from. On your left,' Barry Plunkett gestured, 'Boxes A and B: A is the lower one. On your right,' again the gesture, 'Boxes C and D. Take your pick, madam, and may good luck attend ye!'

'It will be a lower box, of course. And on that side, I think.' Margery Vane swept an arm to the right. 'However! I will make my decision after I have inspected each.'

'Margery - ' began Miss Harkness.

'No, Bess; you had better remain here. Then sit where you like, so long as nobody sits with me. Can you understand my temperament, Mr Plunkett?'

`Only too well, Lady Severn.'

`So like the old Gaiety in Dublin, is it not? But with fewer boxes, alas! How does one reach the boxes, if you please?'

`At the back of the foyer out there,' Barry Plunkett almost Yelled, `there's an enclosed staircase on each side. Hop up either one. For Boxes A and C, walk along the side of the dress circle and open the door. For the upper boxes you'd have to go to balcony level; the entrance to the balcony is outside the theatre.'

`It will not be an upper box, I assure you, I wish to see more of the artists than the tops of their heads. But in that case ...'

She hesitated, looking at Judy. For an instant their glances locked. They made a great contrast: casual, usually repressed Judy, with her brown hair and amber eyes, against the statuesque, queenly, not-so-tall brunette in the shimmering silver gown. Something flashed: between these two, as palpable as a fire in the gaudy theatre. Then it was over. Margery Vane swept round and marched back out into the foyer. Barry Plunkett, with a look between worry and pleasure, tapped Knox's arm.

`Look here, old boy: your women are piling up on you, aren't they?'

Believe it or not,' said the harassed Knox,' `I am a much maligned man. The only woman I want to chase is my own wife.'

`If you really mean that, I'll give you a word of warning. Look out for Anne Winfield. No names in, the mess; I'd not mention this at all, except that she's notorious in every Eastern city. Don't let her get- you in a corner; she'll have your britches off before you know what's; happening: I like it myself; I like plenty of it; but I don't want it every damn minute of the day and night. Anne does.'

He said this just as Judson Lafarge, breathing suppressed ire and followed by Connie, stamped out of the pass door and stamped back up the aisle.

`Where Anne's concerned,' pursued Barry Plunkett, `I think I've even seen a gleam in Judge Cunningham's eye. I think ... yes, Father Jud, what is it?'

`It's the God-damn musicians!' breathed Mr Lafarge, rather like a scout with news of an Indian attack. `They're all set; they're on their way, up; they'll be here in half a minute.'

Knox glanced at his watch; it was twenty-five minutes past nine.

`They know they can't even start the overture until that damn woman blows the whistle for the kick-off; I hope they know it. Anyway, Barry, hadn't you better go back and quiet your actors? Just mentioning that damn woman-'

`Easy, Father Jud; no hurry! The old girl's not so bad if you know how to handle her.'

`Really,' said Judy, avoiding her husband's eye, `mightn't it be best to let Phil handle her? Quite obviously he knows how; he's had results. Or you might send him back with Anne Winfield. That would provide a spectacle even more revolting than the one we've already seen. But at least it would amuse Mr Plunkett.'

Barry Plunkett drew himself up.

`I asked you, old boy,' he said to Knox, `whether you've been having trouble with this one. Well, have you?'

Knox's own temper had soared. `A little, as you can see.'

`Then take the word of one who knows, and stand no nonsense. If they won't behave, make 'em behave. Just wallop her across the stern with your open hand.'

`Like this?' inquired Knox, his hand hovering in the air. He had not the slightest intention of touching Judy, playfully or otherwise. This hardly seemed to matter. Judy, face pale and eyes ablaze, turned on him flaming.

'You dare!' she screamed. `You dare! It may do for your other women, especially these American hussies, but just you dare try that with me.' `Oh, come off it!'

`What's that?'

`Come off it, I said! The hoity-toity, high-and-mighty, out-of-this-world saintliness. Don't pretend you were always like that, "or could be like that today. You didn't really lose your temper, you didn't let out more than a kind of stifled shriek, even when I goosed you on the escalator in the Underground at Piccadilly Circus.'

With her own open hand Judy caught him so hard a crack across the face that his ears sang. Then, face averted and head down," she bolted

blindly up the aisle and through the swing door.

`Well, really!' cried Connie Lafarge.

Barry Plunkett punched Knox in the middle of the back.

'Go after her, old boy; she wants you to go after her! Better not goose her in the middle of Richbell Avenue, though. The cops won't care; they're a broadminded lot hereabouts; but I don't think she's in the mood. Hell's fire, aren't you going to go after her?'

Knox ran. The situation might be wild and undignified; even grotesque, who cared? In all this world there was only one Judy.

He raced out through the dimness of the foyer, and into the bright vestibule. There was a clock against one wall. From behind the ticket window of the wall opposite looked out the same nineteen-year-old girl (Nancy Trimble?) who had been there before. She now seemed in a state of some agitation. Knox saw nobody else.

Richbell Avenue still lay almost empty under its tall white street-lamps. At the curb stood Judson Lafarge's Cadillac. A little way along, westwards in the direction of the railway station, a driverless Rolls-Royce limousine was parked at an angle with its front bumper towards the curb.

Judy had not gone far. In the other direction, to the left as you emerged from the theatre, Knox had already noted a closed drugstore, two closed shops, and then, at the corner of Elm Street, the Lone Tree Tavern.

The first of the two shops was a jeweller's. Judy in her dark blue dress, a white handbag clutched under her left arm, had bent forward as though to study something in the window. Though no light showed inside, pale radiance from a street lamp fell across the glass.

The object of her absorbed attention seemed to be a tray of men's watches arranged against velvet. Emotional temperatures still soared high; Judy's shoulders were eloquent. He did not attempt to touch her or console her or even make her turn round.

`Well,' he said, 'I don't suppose you'd care to talk about Stonewall Jackson?'

`Most c-certainly and d-definitely not! I've told you already, I ...'

`Granted; it's clear. You're not very familiar with my ridiculous American history. You'll become more familiar with it when you disabuse your mind of the notion, not uncommon among your countrymen, that Stonewall Jackson and Andrew Jackson were one and the same man.'

"Look at Jackson standing there like a stone wall!" I know that much, anyhow! His name was Thomas J. Jackson. But they all called him Stonewall, didn't they?'

`No, that's only an official nickname. His men called him Old Jack.'

`All right, if you must correct me. Was Stonewall Jackson - married?'

`Yes.'

`Did he treat his wife as badly as you've treated me?'

`How the hell should I know?'

`Oh?' Still she would not turn, but her voice poured with scorn. `You call yourself a historian, and yet you don't know that?'

`As a matter of fact, Judy, I believe his relations with his wife were very kind and loving.'

`Then he wasn't much like you, was he?'

`Look! said Knox, a memory of Judson Lafarge rising in his mind. `Haven't we had about enough of Stonewall Jackson? Isn't it time to declare a moratorium on Stonewall Jackson? Couldn't we just forget Stonewall Jackson and discuss the rest of the Civil War?'

`That's what you'd like to do, isn't it? You'd love to go on spouting your absurd American poets. But I'll bet,' cried Judy, with whom consistency was never a strong point, `I'll bet you can't do it. I'll bet anything you can't think of one more ridiculous piece of doggerel about the Civil War!'

'You would lose your bet, Judy. I am not enamoured of the subject. However, since your own passion for the Civil War now appears to have no bounds, so be it and here goes.'

He struck a great attitude, hand in air.

`Up from the South at break of day,

Bringing to Winchester fresh dismay,

The affrighted air with a shudder bore

Like a herald in haste to the chieftain's door

The terrible grumble and rumble and roar,

Telling the battle was on once more,

With Sheridan twenty miles away.'

`What on earth is that?'

`It's called Sheridan's Ride.'

'Sheridan and Paul Revere, eh? You people just can't stay off horses. Who was Sheridan?'

`General Philip H. Sheridan, my dear, was a famous Northern cavalry leader. Now don't ask me how he treated his wife! The best thing I know of him is that he once polished off a pint of whisky before leading a charge uphill.'

`You always did admire drunkards, didn't you? Especially when they're called Philip. It seems to me-'

The words ended in a smothered shriek.

`Judy

`You goosed me. You deliberately....!'

'Sorry, my dear. The target was too conspicuous; it couldn't be resisted. And you asked for it, didn't you?'

`You goosed me! You caught me off-guard and goosed me! Oo, you unspeakable villain, what I'd like to-'

At last she whirled round. Judy was crying; tears flew from her eyes at the twitch of her head. She lifted both fists, her intentions not clear, The next instant, however it happened, they were in each other's arms and clinging together.

'H-humiliating me in front of your friends!' 'sobbed Judy. `And fighting, positively fighting,' she burst out, `with real swords and daggers. You might have been hurt; you might have been killed. Or

you might have killed that wretched Plunkett man and gone to the electric chair!

'I somehow feel, though, that a good lawyer could have squared it. And you didn't say a word during the brawl.'

'Do you think I was going to show how I felt? I'll never forgive you as long as I live! And standing here like this: it's rather ridiculous, isn't it?'

'Quite ridiculous. But very pleasant, don't you think?' 'No, I do not. Let me go, please!'

'For the last ten seconds, my dear, I have not been holding you at all. You've been holding me.'

Judy dropped her arms and leaped back. She had stopped crying. The handbag, retained through all her vicissitudes by its strap over her wrist, she now opened to produce a compact and repair her face by the deceptive radiance of the street lamp.

'I suppose we must return to that wretched theatre. Come along. Yes, you may put your arm round me if you feel you must. But walk slowly, please; I want to explain how awful you've been.'

'You know, Judy, I've been thinking. ...'

'Thinking what?'

'Emotionally, at least, we used to be very immature. If we tried it again-'

'You mean you want to goose me again?'

'Nothing in the least like that, I assure you! My thought was of an approach (shall we say?) from a different direction.'

'What a low mind you have! And it would never work, you know. All you could ever do in the old days was rave on about me and Tommy Ellis, me and Joe Hathaway...!'

'And all you could ever do, I must point out, was rave on about me and Nell Wentworth, me and Dolores Datchett ... !'

'It wouldn't work, I tell you! Besides, how could you love me? You think I've got a big behind.'

`I don't think you've got a big behind!'

`You said-'

`I said the target was conspicuous; I didn't say it was large.'

`Anyway,' Judy whispered against his ear, 'I paid you back in full for goosing me as we were going up the escalator in the Underground. Oo, I paid you back so completely! You were bending over to turn out the gas fire in the living room, and-'

`Where's your saintliness now, Judy?'

`Who's saintly? Who ever wanted to be?'

`What ho!' said another voice.

Judy's head was on Knox's shoulder as they entered the vestibule of the theatre. Instantly both straightened up. Barry Plunkett, his makeup an unearthly hue under bright light, stood regarding them like a benevolent uncle.

`Egad, old boy, but this is what I'd hoped for! Isn't it much better than goosing the poor girl and causing a lot of trouble?'

His expression changed; it grew rather sombre.

`Listen, both of you. I've got to go now; we're just about ready. The place is yours. Sit where you please; wander at your will. You can even go back-stage if you've a mind to. If you go back-stage, though, don't try to strike up a conversation with the people you meet, especially when you see somebody muttering to himself in a corner. They're all edgy; I'm a bit on edge myself; we don't want anybody to go bonkers and clock you one. God bless; excuse me!'

Whipping round, an impressive blue and silver figure with sword and dagger bumping at his sides, he loped away and vanished. Judson Lafarge, with what looked like a sheaf of glossy paper booklets in his side pocket, emerged from the foyer at the same moment.

`Programme!' announced Mr Lafarge, thrusting one booklet at Judy and another at Knox. 'We had 'em printed for tomorrow night; best of everything too. In England, Barry says, they make you pay for these things. Is that true, Phil?'

`Yes. And they're not very informative either.'

`Wish we could do the same thing; it'd be a neat little sideline. But we can't, and I know it. Jesus Christ, they'd tear the theatre apart if we started charging fifty cents or a buck just to see who was playing what!'

'You can sell big souvenir programmes, can't you?'

`Maybe, if we don't land in the Bankruptcy Court first. And that's not all.' He looked at Judy. `Her Royal Highness is in Box C, the lower one on the right-hand side. She wants to see you.'

`To see me? When?'

`Now ! And you know what the damn woman is. Better go and get it over with!'

`If you don't want to go, Judy,' said Knox, `tell her to jump in the lake. Or I'll tell her myself, if you'd prefer that.'

`No!' cried Judy. `I'll go and get it over with, as Mr Lafarge says. You won't try to come with me, will you, Phil? Please, please don't try to come with me!'

`Judy, why are you afraid of Margery Vane?'

'I'm not afraid of her; who says I am? Which way, Mr Lafarge?'

`I'll take you to the dress circle,' answered that bedevilled man. `The office is off there; I'm going to the office, and then coining down here again to make sure no unauthorized person gets in. Where are you going, Phil?'

`To the dress circle too, I think. But on the opposite side, where I can--'

He stopped. He did not add, `where I can look across and try to make sure things are as they should be'.

`Come on, then!' bawled Connie's husband: `The Goddamn orchestra leader is dancing around like a man going into a fit; we'll have a Goddamn strike on our hands if we delay much longer. For Pete's sake come on!'

And he hustled them into the semi-darkness of the foyer.

Knox had not previously observed the two enclosed staircases, right and left at the rear, though the dully illuminated red letters `Dress

circle' could be seen at the top of each if you put your head inside. From above, now, there was also a soft glow of light which did not penetrate far down. You could hear a plunk of tuning fiddles.

Judson Lafarge hurried Judy up the stairs on the right, Knox, pausing only long enough to glance at Margery Vane's portrait, ran to the left-hand side and took the steps three at a time.

He was more than halfway up when an impression, only half registered during a glance at something else, took form in his mind. He raced downstairs faster than he had come up. He went to Margery Vane's portrait and looked at the wall below it.

His first half-impression had been correct.

The crossbow below the portrait was gone.

7

BEGINNING OF PANIC

THE CROSSBOW, whalebone and metal and wood inlaid with ivory, was missing. So were the two iron bolts which had flanked it. Knox struck a match and held the flame close to the wall for a better look. Into the rose-and-white panel had been screwed a small metal ring; presumably there was some hook on the crossbow by which it had hung there.

Small staples had supported the heavy heads of the bolts. Unlike the one previously carried by Barry Plunkett, Knox remembered, this crossbow had been equipped with no leather sling.

Well, what did you do when you made a discovery of this sort?

Touch off an alarm, notify the police, what?

Several courses were possible. But Philip Knox, even with 'dread at his heart,' felt that other matters must be investigated first. For a time he stood pondering. Then again he hurried up the left-hand stairs to the dress circle.

Only the balcony loomed above him now. The house lights were fully on, a soft golden radiance on gilt and white and deep crimson. Footlights shone on closed curtains; twin masks of comedy and tragedy grimaced above the proscenium arch. The ten-piece orchestra had taken its place, somewhat shuffling with music stands. Fiddles

plunked; a trill ran along the xylophone; somebody kicked the frame of a snare-drum. The leader of the orchestra, an angry-looking little man in an obvious wig, stood fidgeting with his baton in his hand.

A faint facepowder haze seemed to hang in the air, though this must be an illusion. Could there be a chill in the air too? Knox looked around him.

Except for the aisles at the extreme ends, by which you went forward to Box A on this side and Box C on the far side, only one aisle led down through the dress circle to its front row of seats. At the top of this aisle, crewcut head forward as though listening, stood Lawrence Porter. How or when the young man had come there Knox didn't know and didn't care. In the front row of the dress circle, more towards this side than towards the middle, Miss Elizabeth Harkness sat lighting a cigarette.

Knox glanced across the house.

`So?' he thought.

Margery Vane was very much in Box C. So was Judy. After one look in that direction, a worried man forgot everything else. He ran along the end aisle to the outer entrance of Box A.

Box A was in a kind of shell enclosure, painted white but heavily crusted with arabesques of gilt. The aisle door opened into a short, cramped, dead-end passage containing nothing but a pink-shaded light bulb and some iron steps leading upwards.

The door to the box itself, a thick oak door painted white, was on his right. He threw it open, automatically noting the tight-fitting bolt on the inside, and entered in a rush.

The place smelt stuffy, having no illumination except what penetrated from the house or from the single dim bulb in the passage behind. The rail or ledge, - rather low, was topped with red plush. A flamboyant sofa, also rather low, was upholstered in red plush. Three red plush chairs, rather high, had been pushed forward. There was a tiny round table with nothing on it. But the newcomer paid little attention to furnishings. His whole- attention was fixed on the tableau in Box C across the house.

It could be called a tableau.

Margery Vane in the low-cut silver gown stood with her back to the

ledge. One bare shoulder was lifted she seemed to be-speaking forcibly, though no words could be distinguished. Facing her, back to the white box door, stood Judy. And the whole atmosphere on Judy's part, at least was one of sheer panic.

Her hands were clasped together in front of her. The pretty face had a look of pleading or beseeching. Margery Vane continued to talk; the orchestra leader fidgeted below.

Knox almost called out, and then restrained himself. Suddenly Judy whirled round. She opened the door, dashed out, and disappeared:

In queenly fashion Miss Vane turned to face the house. The orchestra leader, on, anguished tenterhooks, glanced upwards. Slowly, definitely, Margery Vane shook her head. While the orchestra leader did a kind of caper, his lips mouthing inaudible words, she went to the white door, closed it, and firmly bolted it.

All this, however, the watcher saw only from the corner of his eye. He was too occupied in following Judy.

Judy, running, had emerged from the box enclosure at the far side of the dress circle. There she checked herself. Looking along the front row, she saw Bess Harkness seated there with a cigarette, and made what looked like a gesture of frantic appeal.

Miss Harkness, after a move which was not unsympathetic, half rose and beckoned. Moving over several places, bringing herself closer to the left-hand side, she sat down in another red plush fauteuil beside one across whose back Margery Vane's mink coat lay open on its hanger. She patted the empty chair to her right. Judy, edging past upended seats in the front row, made straight for it.

Knox had made a move to hurry out and join her. That was where Judy glanced across and caught his eye. Her look, no less than her gesture, spoke plainly. 'Stay away!' it said. 'Stay away, I beg; don't come near me!' And this was not one of Judy's moods which meant little or nothing.

It halted him. He was also halted by a voice from across the house. Margery Vane in the silver gown had assumed a commanding position with her face towards stage and closed curtains. Once more the clear, beautiful, carrying; voice rang. through the theatre.

'You hear me, I think. Yes, I address the ladies and gentlemen of the Margery Vane Players! Don't applaud, please, merely hear me. I shall

not detain you long from my pleasure.'

'She's reversed it!' Knox was thinking. 'By all that's holy, she's reversed it! She's the actress and they're the audience. That is-'

'You also know me, I think,' the voice continued. 'I am Margery Vane. I had once some small reputation in the profession to which you now aspire. If my meagre applause could be heard by you as I hear it in my heart, it would sound as loud as the ovation of a parade up Broadway. If the good wishes I feel for you could be set as stones one above the other, they would outrear the topless towers of Ilium.'

'But why do I address you in this ill-mannered way?'

It called for no response, though 'Knox thought the orchestra leader might make one. Margery Vane herself was serenely unconscious of this. Her voice would have held nearly anyone.

'Thirty-seven years ago, almost to the night, a tragedy occurred on the stage where you are about to appear. Adam Cayley, then my husband, fell dead during the duel' with Tybalt. At that time we erred, I think; and, because we erred, at that time we failed. As a tribute to Mr Cayley's memory we postponed our opening a full fortnight.

'But would Adam Cayley himself have considered it a tribute? He would not. Could a lonely ghost have spoken then, we should have heard little but, "Go on; I say go on! Let nothing stop you. Success is your prize; seize it well!"

'As he would have charged you then, so I charge you now. Each of you, I am assured, has been medically examined and found fit. There will be no tragedy to blight the story of the Mask Theatre. Yet if by some chance -the remote contingency should occur, let nothing stop you from opening tomorrow night. Were there fifty dead to account for, were the sullied flesh as thick-strewn as when once plague carts rumbled through London streets, still would I say, "Go on!"

'If I am right in so thinking, you will have faced the forces of rumour and stared them down. From the nettle superstition you will have plucked the flower success, and may God speed the day! If I am wrong in so thinking, my consolation must be that I have erred only in wishing you too well. If any at all cherish me in my advancing years, it must be you whom I have chosen for my own. You at least for my error will exonerate and comfort me, "pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne".'

Eloquently she let her arm fall. And there were some at least who could not resist it. From behind the closed curtains, hardly cut off by them, rose first a spatter and then a roar of applause which seemed to shake the theatre.

Eloquently, let it be repeated, Margery Vane let her arm fall. She drew a deep breath, looked down, and turned a baleful eye on the orchestra leader

'Go ahead, then!' she snapped.

The orchestra leader lost his temper and almost lost his wig. He wheeled on his minions.

`Gentlemen, gen-tle-men!' he said in anguish, as though every member of the orchestra had been carrying on rowdily and making rude noises under his nose. `Gentlemen, gentle-men!'

But the leader, well schooled, controlled himself. He lifted his baton. At the same instant the house lights began to dwindle and fade. Somebody had planned every possible atmospheric effect, including the unusual one of a blackout during the overture.

Casting a reassured glance at Judy, who was whispering rapidly to Miss Harkness in, the front row of the dress circle, Knox took from his pocket the programme he had forgotten. He thrust his head out of the open doorway, flipped open the programme, and held it towards the single light in the passage. The words `directed by Barry Plunkett' leaped up at him. He turned back towards the stage, closing the door just as the music rolled out.

Was it the overture to Gounod's opera, Romeo and Juliet? Some other part of the same opera, or composed for this occasion? Lacking musical knowledge, he couldn't tell. To untutored ears, at least, it had power and tragic life. It whispered suggestion as Judy herself seemed to be whispering in a darkening house. Judy's image vanished. In darkness complete except for a faint firefly glow above music-stands, the overture swelled, appealed, and presently died.

Knox had expected the orchestra to creep away by the little door under the stage. They remained in their places; save to turn pages, nobody stirred. That meant incidental music, mood music, what in another medium would have been called sneak music. No wonder Judson Lafarge had raved about expense!

In darkness a fine voice - Barry Plunkett's, Knox thought -

arrestingly spoke the prologue over a microphone without burr or blur.

`Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene
From ancient grudge breaks to new mutiny,
Where civil bloodmakes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life ...'

That was the keynote, while violins wove a thread beneath. The prologue ended. The tall red curtains swept apart on `Verona, a public place'.

At least they would not kill the words with over-elaborate sets. The effect was one of hot, hard sunlight on a white wall, against which costumes splashed vivid sixteenth-century colour.

Forth strode, two Capulet henchmen, Gregory and the quarrelsome Sampson, crossbow on back, sword and dagger at hip, in a barrage of puns. Sampson's challenge to two Montague henchmen brought on dependable; Benvolio, who essayed peace but turned to meet the challenge of fiery Tybalt in black. Their brief burst of, swordplay was interrupted first by an officer and three enraged citizens carrying halberds; then by the enraged old Capulet and old Montague themselves, with wives; and finally by Prince Escalus, looking even more royal than seemed necessary, and in a greater rage than anybody.

`On pain of torture, from those bloody hands
Throw your mistempered weapons to the ground,
And hear the sentence of your moved prince ...
If ever you disturb our streets again;
Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.'

The door of Box A was opened, admitting a line of light. Knox jumped despite himself.

In the doorway stood a middle-sized, swarthy, powerfully built man with a hook-nosed profile and a gleam of teeth when he smiled. For a moment light lay along the swarthy face; then he entered and closed the door softly.

`Evening!' he said in a soft, heavy voice. `Didn't mean to disturb you.'

`You're not disturbing me, exactly. I'm-'

`Yes, I know.' The newcomer's dark suit blended with the gloom
`You're' Mr Knox. Your father used to be a legal wheel hereabouts. I know you, though you wouldn't know me. I'm a cop. To be dignified about it, I'm a police officer!

'Are you by any chance Lieutenant Spinelli?'

`That's me, Mr Knox. What can I do for you? Dr Fell and Mr Gulick-'

`Where are Dr Fell and Mr Gulick?'

`Still gassing at the hotel, far as I know. Trust a bunch of lawyers to go on shooting the breeze as long as they've got breath in 'em. Not that Dr Fell's any slouch at shooting the breeze himself. When I used to know him ...'

`You knew Dr Fell?'

`Long time ago; in England; during the war. I was stationed in the West Country; we'd take food to Dr and Mrs Fell in London. You've been over there yourself a good many years, they tell me. Well, Mr Knox, what can I do for you?'

`Lieutenant Spinelli, there's something I'd better tell you right away.'

`Is it about the crossbow? The one that got lifted from the lobby downstairs? And a couple of iron arrows too?' `You know about it?'

`Yes, I know about it.'

`It doesn't seem to bother you much.'

`Well ... now. What's "bother"?' Lieutenant Spinelli made a tolerant gesture. `No cop likes to see potentially deadly weapons floating around. But look down at that stage! There's enough of 'em, one way or another, to fight an old-time war.'

Romeo and Juliet had got brilliantly under way. As though inspired, they were carrying it at so swinging a pace that the 'two hours' traffic of our stage' promised to be less than the two and a half or three hours it customarily took. Romeo had made his entrance, a tall young man in a saffron doublet slashed with black and, like all other noblemen, a short cloak. He brooded on his hopeless love for that fair Rosaline who is never to appear, and whom he contrives almost immediately to forget.

Lieutenant Spinelli ruminated.

'Yes, I know about the crossbow. But I'm not worried, if that's what you mean; I think it's a gag. And there are two reasons why I'm not worrying a hell of a lot. Like to hear 'em?'

'Very much.'

'Well! Let's not disturb Roscius & Co,' he indicated the stage, 'by standing here gassing too. Shh, now! Come with me, will you?'

Like a couple of conspirators they tiptoed out into the tiny passage with the pink-shaded bulb. Lieutenant Spinelli saw to it that both doors were closed. Then he stood with his back to the light, jingling coins in his pocket.

'That Ferrara boy is a good actor,' he said. 'And they're a pretty bunch of people, take 'em by and large. None of this sissy stuff, either; the Irishman won't have it in his company. Look, Mr Knox: I've got things to tell you. But do you mind if I ask one or two questions first?'

'Not a bit. Fire away.'

Lieutenant Spinelli was very tough. But he took this so much for granted, Knox knew, that he seldom needed to let it show. He could afford to seem easy going, as for the most part he was.

'It's this way,' he continued, the swarthy face intent. 'That young lady in the blue dress: the one sitting with Miss - Miss What's-her-name - Miss Harkness, I think the name is. Would she be your wife?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'"Suppose" so?'

'She is my wife. We've been estranged for a good many years, though we've never been divorced.'

`You a Catholic?'

`No, I'm a Presbyterian. Judy was brought up in the Church of England. What's that got to do with it?'

`Nothing! Just curiosity! Now about that crossbow.' Again Lieutenant Spinelli ruminated. `First, there's something Judge Cunningham told me the other day.'

`With your permission,' interposed Judge Cunningham, at that moment opening the door to the dress circle, `with your permission, Lieutenant, I should like to make the explanation myself.'

Lean, immaculate, his soft hat in his hand, he closed the door behind him. But he seemed a little agitated.

`The crossbow, Philip - yes, Lieutenant, I am already acquainted with this gentleman! - did you examine it closely?'

`Fairly closely, yes.'

`I told you, I think, that the crossbows in my collection had been fitted with modern cords and would work. I should have said "for the most part" The warbow downstairs (Spanish, circa 1560) has not been modernized in any way. It is in the highest degree unlikely that this bow could be fired at all.'

`There was no sling, such as the others have. Are the slings modern too?'

`They are,' returned Judge Cunningham. `But the important thing, Philip, is the mechanism. The sixteenth century cord, rotted, all but snapped when it was gingerly drawn to firing position. Would the trigger work? It would - not work when, I tried it with an unstrung bow; age and disuse have clogged it past hope. Barring repair by a skilled mechanic'

'Dear God!' said Judge Cunningham, inexplicably moved. 'I do not say, mark you, that this is a thing absolutely impossible. And yet, if a thousandth unpredictability made the trigger release its cord, what would happen? The cord would break, the bolt fly wild or lie still. Only a lunatic would attempt to use it for lethal purposes; and, with the possible exception of Mr Plunkett himself, we have not even a partial lunatic among us. You have a question, Philip?'

`Yes, sir. Who knew all this?'

'I can tell you that, announced'. Lieutenant Spinelli.

`EVERYBODY knew it; actors, stagehands, the whole caboodle. This Lady Severn and her `bunch; they knew it too, if that interests anybody. When she called me on the phone early this evening...'

Judge Cunningham_ blinked. `Lady Severn called you on the phone?'

'Caught me at the office on Sunday night; wouldn't you know? She didn't want me, particularly; she just wanted a cop. But by this tune I've learned more about the woman and her affairs than anybody's ever going to guess.'

`Will you both,' said judge Cunningham, 'be good enough to excuse me now? Being detained at home, I have only just arrived. Nancy Trimble at the box office told me of the missing bow, Lieutenant, and said you had questioned her. She also informed me the rehearsal had started at exactly nine forty-five, just three quarters of an hour late ...'

Lieutenant Spinelli nodded.

'... and of the reason for the delay. We are honoured, it seems. I am most anxious to see the show, though I must take an orchestra seat well forward. My hearing is not [what. it](#)

was. Will you excuse me?'

`Sure thing, judge!' the other said heartily. `They're giving it the treatment; if I'm any judge, which I may not be, it's in the bag this time:. You go ahead, sir. See you later.'

The door closed.

`Now, then, Mr Knox!)

'Lieutenant, you said there were two reasons why you weren't unduly worried.'

`That's right; Mr Knox; there are. And the second reason, to my way of thinking, is an even better one than a crossbow that won't work. Still! If it's all right with you, Mr Knox, I'll just hold it up for a little while, and go on with the one or two questions I didn't ask before Judge Cunningham came in. OK?'

'OK:'

'As the judge said,' continued Lieutenant Spinelli, `I talked - to

Nancy Trimble downstairs. Then. I thought it might be a good idea to have a, word with Lady Severn herself about another matter. I know she's got a reputation for being a tough cookie, but she couldn't have been nicer than she was to me on the phone.'

`At times, of course, she can be the original Sweetheart of Sigma Chi. At other times-'

'Yes: I found that out.'

`Well, Lieutenant?'

`Well!' said the other. 'Up I came. She'd just finished giving Hamlet's Advice to the Players. She sat down and got comfortable. The lights started to go out; the orchestra went at it; I moseyed along to Box C The door was bolted, as I'd been led to expect. But she didn't even come to the door when I called. She just told me to get the hell out of her hair in politer language, of course - and quit bothering her while she was watching the show.'

'So I quit bothering her. I thought I might get the information I wanted from Miss What's-it, Miss Harkness, whom I'd seen sitting with the woman I now know to be your wife. I groped my way down there and took the pew beside Mrs Knox. I did get some information, but I didn't stay.'

long there either. Now for a question. Mr Knox, what's wrong with your wife?'

The, swarthy face in front of him did not look sinister; it even looked heavily confidential as Lieutenant Spinelli bent forward.

'Is anything wrong with her? I hadn't noticed.'

'Maybe husbands don't notice; I don't, for one. But I'm here to tell you: if ever I saw a frightened woman in my life, and I've seen plenty, that woman was Mrs Knox. She was just about able to introduce herself, and that's all. The other dame had got her quieted down some, but she was ready to go through the roof.'

'Sure you weren't mistaken? It was dark, wasn't it?'

'It was plenty dark, but I couldn't have been-mistaken about that. If anything did happen here tonight - which God forbid, and which I don't expect! - the first thing I'd want to know would be what's eating your wife. They both said you were in the box here, so I came along.'

`Now look, Mr Knox!' pursued Lieutenant Spinelli, hooking his left thumb in his belt and drawing designs in the air with his right forefinger. `We both want to see this show; Tony Ferrara's a kind of relative of rime. But I can't sit still. In just a minute, now, I'm going out and prowling around.'

`So am I In the meantime, though ...?'

`In the meantime, Mr Knox,' Lieutenant Spinelli announced with decision, 'I'll ask one more question and then quit bothering you. Do you know a young fellow named Larry Porter? Lady Severn said you and Dr Fell met him on shipboard?'

`Yes, we met him.'

`Have you seen him here tonight?'

`Yes, once. When I came upstairs he was standing at the back of the dress circle.'

`He was standing there when I came up. At least, I thought it must be Porter from the description. What happened to him afterwards? Where did he go?'

`I haven't any idea; I hardly noticed him. Lieutenant,' Knox burst out, `what is all this? What's so important about Porter? Why are you interested?'

`Well, you see,' answered Carlo Spinelli, `that's partly the

reason why I'm here. It's behind a good deal of the fuss and hoo-ha. Lady Severn wants to have him arrested.'

8

PANIC

`ARRESTED?'

`I'm telling you, Mr Knox!'

`Can you tell me more?'

`Sure; why not? I'd better explain about the phone call. What is this fellow Porter: some kind of gigolo or something?'

`I don't know. You'll have to ask her.'

`That's partly what I, was trying to do when she gave me gave me ...'

`The brush-off'

`Say the bum's rush; that's what it amounted to. But about this phone call, now!'

From his inside breast pocket Lieutenant Spinelli took a notebook, consulted its pages, and replaced it.

`It was just before seven this evening, give or take a little,' he went on. `I hadn't been home to dinner. Flo (Flo's my wife) has been raising hell about something or other. So I got a sandwich at the diner and went back to the office. The phone rang; they put her through to me. She was at the Pershing Hotel, as I'd already heard. And for the first few seconds she was pretty snooty. She talks like the one and only Lady Vere de Vere, though I hear she comes from Montclair, New Jersey.'

`What's the matter with Montclair, New Jersey?'

`Nothing at all! I'm-not saying a word against the place, even if the New York State drinking laws are milder than Jersey's and they get sore because their kids come over here to tie one on.

`Well! She didn't want to speak to me in particular, as I think I told you. She said she had to talk to somebody in authority on a matter of grave importance,- and I said I was the lieutenant in charge. When I told her my name, she said, "You speak carelessly, officer" - at first, she kept calling me "officer" as if she thought I' was a traffic cop "but you speak like a man of education. If you're the Lieutenant Spinelli whom Judge Cunningham invited to the dress rehearsal tonight, I have already approved the invitation; it should make us excellent friends, surely?" From that minute we got along like a house on fire.

`Now, Mr Knox, I know a lot of ten-dollar words. I don't use 'em much; it's better not to; but I know 'em. Holy Mary! There she was, using ten-dollar words and practically cooing at me. There I was, using ten-dollar words and cooing right back at her. What Flo would have said I hate to think.' '

`But about Porter?'

`Yes, about Porter. I don't know whether they're living together; they've got adjoining rooms in a suite at the hotel Now it seems she owns a, lot of very valuable jewellery she inherited from her husband:

her second husband, Lord - Severn, I mean. It's heavy Edwardian stuff, heirlooms in the family. She won't wear the stuff "flamboyant and vulgar", was what she said ' - and claims she hasn't much taste for jewellery anyway.'

`Come to think of it,' Knox was reflecting hard, `I never saw her wear any jewellery at all, except a string of pearls in the next to the last; night out. But my acquaintance with the lady is limited to four days out of seven on an ocean crossing, so that's nothing to go by.'

`Well, this is something to go by,' retorted Lieutenant ' Spinelli, producing his notebook again. `She won't wear the stuff, I say, though' she keeps it with her in a jewel-box. It includes a kind of gold dog-collar, a big linked collar studded with diamonds and emeralds, and a diamond bracelet with every rock as big as the stopper out of a decanter.

`Now get this! Soon after they'd checked in at the hotel, and not long before she called me, she saw Mr Porter at the jewel--box in her bedroom. He wasn't greedy; he didn't take anything except the collar and the bracelet. But he stuck those in his pocket and sneaked out.'

`Just a minute, Lieutenant! Was Porter at the hotel when she called you?'

`At the hotel, but not in the suite. He'd gone down to the drugstore for a chocolate malt: Then: she said, "I want you to say hello to my lifelong friend and companion, Bess Harkness. Anything -I know, she knows." I said, "Does' she know about this little business, ma'am?" Lady Severn said, "Not yet, but she'll have to know; I'll tell her later."

`So she howled for Bess Harkness, who was pressing pants or something in another room, "If ever I'm snot available," she said, "you speak to Bess. She's petite; she has fair hair and wears glasses; you can't miss her."

`The Harkness dame did say, hello, but it's all she had a chance to say. La Dame aux Camelias chased her away, locked the door, and then went up like an astronaut.

`Larry Porter, it seemed, comes of an old Southern family, though he was brought up in the North and doesn't -say y' all or talk about his grandpappy. She's been backing him as a tennis player on the Riviera. But that's' the only good she could tell me. He's an ingrate and a crook and a heel. She'd had about enough already, and this was too much.

"I've hired a limousine," says she, "and very shortly the three of us are going over to call on my company at the Mask Theatre. I want you to arrest him there. But I won't say anything to Master Larry, I won't even hint he's going to get it in the you-know-what, until you walk; up and put; him in handcuffs."

`Handcuffs, eh? Do I need handcuffs to take that pip squeak?

`All the same - these women! You say or do something that bugs hell out of 'em. They don't let on; they don't breathe a word. They wait for hours, maybe days, and then blow their stacks over something so trivial you never think of the real cause and just: wonder if they've gone nuts. True

or false, Mr Knox?. Didn't it ever happen to you?

`Well, yes,' Knox admitted. I have met the attitude once or twice.'

`Not that I'm defending Porter, or saying one word against Lady Severn. But ... did she mean it? Would she mean it a couple of hours later? She sounded vindictive enough, God knows; twice as mean as Flo ever has. But booking somebody's a damn definite act; it can't be retracted. Besides, there are prominent people connected with this company; we don't want any more of a stink than we need to have.

`"Ma'am," I said, "suppose you decide you just want the stuff back without any action being taken? Wouldn't it be better," I said, "if I waited and had a word with you at the theatre before I put the arm on him?" She said no. But I insisted; I waited. And what did it get me? The bum's rush.

`And that's not all,' Lieutenant Spinelli suddenly raved, jamming the notebook back in his pocket, `because I've heard other things at this theatre tonight. I don't say they're all bad; in fact, there'll be no trouble with crossbows or other weapons. But your wife bothers me a little. And what about that gentlemanly gigolo?'

`Easy, Lieutenant! For God's sake take it easy!'

`Should I just kick his teeth in and make him disgorge now? Or wait for the Vere de Vere to know I'm alive? Never mind, friend. Let's go and see the show.'

Knox's watch told him that it was ten minutes past ten. Between then and a quarter past, eleven, he knew a variety of emotions.

As they emerged into the darkened dress circle, Lieutenant Spinelli stalked up the end aisle, crossed over to the left halfway up, and stalked on up the centre aisle towards the point at which they had last seen Lawrence Porter standing.

Guided by the glow of Bess Harkness's eternal cigarette, Knox made instantly for the place where Judy sat beside the older woman. But Judy rose at him in such a state of nerves

`There's nothing wrong, I tell you; it'll be all right if you just let me alone!' - that he retreated, fearing to draw back Spinelli for more questioning. Miss Harkness lit another cigarette, the match flame reflected in her glasses. Glancing across the house, Knox could make out the outline of Margery Vane, sitting motionless with her arms folded on the box ledge, intent on the stage.

Lieutenant Spinelli did not find Lawrence Porter; you could hear him on his way back. Wanting no more conversation at this time, Knox descended the enclosed stairs to the

foyer. Judson Lafarge and Connie, also prowling, passed him like a couple of ghosts. He pushed open the swing door and wandered down the aisle where he had exchanged cuts and thrusts with Barry Plunkett.

His eyes were growing used to darkness. Nor was it entirely dark. Since Adam Cayley had built the Mask after the design of more than one theatre in Dublin and London, many end-of-aisle seats were equipped, on the outer- side well down, with, tiny lights to shine on the floor and guide latecomers into the proper row. The firefly gleams of the orchestra pit helped too.

He did not see judge Cunningham anywhere in front. Taking the aisle seat, fourth row back on the left-hand side, he himself lighted a cigarette and turned his attention to the stage.

As scene followed scene in the first act, they were all playing at top form, even with a certain feverishness. The Mask had no revolving stage. Yet scene changes remained surprisingly quick, covered, in any case by musical bridges which provided almost as many orchestral cues, as an opera, and accounted for the near-dementia of the orchestra leader.

Juliet made her entrance in the third scene. From her first line, `How now, who calls?' it became evident that Anne Winfield would more than hold her own. It was a spark; you could not miss it. 'Come

Lammas Eve at night,' said the fat nurse, 'Shall she be fourteen.' In fact she looked little more than fourteen, with an incandescence Anglo-Saxon fourteen can seldom show. Anne Winfield's ethereal and spiritual beauty so captured imagination that those remembered words, 'She's notorious in every Eastern city', now seemed as grotesque as they were ill-chosen.

Anthony Ferrara as Romeo made you understand the character, though still he walked in Mercutio's shade. Barry Plunkett's Mercutio' was a hell of a fellow, bawdy but sound, fond of Romeo and pitilessly mocking him. Mercutio pranced as so vital a human being that you were a little startled to remember he would be killed not much past the beginning of the third act.

Meanwhile the music tinkled; the dancers at Capulet's house mopped and mowed in goblin masks of some rubber or plastic composition, which fitted over the whole head and face without impeding speech.

'Bravo!' cried Margery Vane.

She applauded vigorously as the lights went on at the end of the first act. Another spatter of applause burst from the back of the house Knox did not turn to find; its source. Margery Vane stood up in her silver gown, gown and hair and shoulders gleaming; she looked a little like the girl who played Juliet. On the small round table in Box C stood a glass and a pitcher of water which had long ceased to be ice-water. Miss Vane poured half a glass, sipped,, made a smiling coquettish gesture towards audience or lack of audience, and sat down again.

Knox remained in his seat during the brief interval. He was glad he did. For, with the second act, Romeo and Juliet came into their own.

Mercutio and the nurse kept bawdry going. But the second act's triumph belonged to the lovers. They played the balcony scene with a lyric ecstasy which moved at least one spectator.

Knox pondered this. Perhaps, in sixteenth-century Verona or anywhere else, lovers did not soliloquize, at windows or in orchards so as conveniently to overhear each other. Under the spell and power of words, who cared?

Not Romeo. Not Knox himself. It swept you away.

'With love's light wings did I o'er-perch these walls,

For stony limits cannot hold love out;

And what love can do, that dares love attempt.

Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me

Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye

Than twenty of their swords; look thou but sweet,

And I am, proof against their enmity.'

And Juliet?

'If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully,

Or, if thou think'st I am too quickly won,

I'll frown, and be perverse, and say thee nay,

So though wilt woo; but else, not for the world.

In truth, fair Montague, I am too fond;

And therefore thou mayst think my 'haviour light;

But trust me, Romeo, I'll prove more true

Than those that have more cunning to be strange.

Good, for Juliet! Good for those- sentiments!

If only another woman would ...!

Philip Knox, in short, was in a romantic mood.

The end of the second act, with its foreshadowing of pointless tragedy through error, found him -as restless as formerly he had been hypnotized.

Again Margery Vane applauded hard. Again applause spattered behind Knox's back. He glanced round and up. The applause came from Miss Harkness and (astonishingly?) from Judy herself, both leaning forward in the front row of the dress circle.

He could not sit still. He sprang to his feet and took a turn in the aisle. Go behind the scenes now? Why not?

`Go back-stage: if you've a mind to,' Barry Plunkett had said. 'But-' and the rest of the warning, which he would remember.

The house lights were full - on for the interval. The orchestra charged into a new number, violin bows working like spiders' legs. Knox edged his way between the seats to the end aisle and towards the pass door at the left of the proscenium arch. He waved to Judy, who waved back. Two seconds later the iron door had, closed behind him.

In the profound gloom a short flight of concrete steps led up to stage level. At the top of these he entered the strange, tall, twilight cavern behind the scenes, amid ghostly shapes of flats.

Voices rang hollowly, and seemed to issue from nowhere. The paint-and-powder smell had intensified, 'as though tingeing the air' with its dust motes. Various people in costume shuttled back and forth, singly or in, groups, amid an atmosphere of urgency and nerves.

Knox looked out from the wings. They had struck Friar Lawrence's cell; they were setting the `public place' for scene one of act three; stagehands moved with decision and speed. Farther back in the wings he saw Judge Cunningham standing, but did not stay for words.

Off the wings, a concrete-floored corridor with a line of doors ran straight back. Groping, intent not to stumble, Knox wandered along this corridor. He saw Romeo muttering to himself beside a fire extinguisher; he saw Lady Capulet, and the conspicuous headdress of the nurse. At the rear of the corridor, a flight of stairs led upwards. Presumably the doors here led to dressing rooms, with more dressing rooms upstairs. He would not have entered a dressing room, though nobody seemed to be using them now. But on his way back along the corridor, exploration finished, he saw a door labelled broom cupboard.

He opened the door idly - and closed it very quickly. The place may have been used for the brooms and buckets of the cleaning-women. But, it was otherwise employed now.

At the back; facing towards him, stood virginal Juliet in her white dress and silver hairnet. She did not see him, She had one foot on a vacuum cleaner; her arms were locked round a young man in green and gold, who was kissing her with considerable effect.

Ashamed of himself, more embarrassed: than either of these two would have been had he interrupted them, Knox hastened along. He

had almost reached the steps leading down to the pass door when he saw Barry Plunkett, sword in hand, making calculated slashes in the air at an imaginary opponent. He would have gone by without speaking, but a voice stopped him.

`Look here, old boy, what ails you? Trying to cut us all dead?'

`You said-!'

`I said not to bother anybody with jitters. I didn't, say to ignore me. Well, how's it going?'

`You ought to know. Congratulations!'

`On what?' demanded the Irishman. `It's ragged, old boy, it's bloody ragged. I swore we'd go. through without a break, and we will. But Romeo had better pull up his socks in the third act, to say nothing of the fourth and the fifth, or-' Again he slashed at the air.

`Romeo? Is this a joke? I thought-'

`Oh, don't take me too seriously. Tony's not as bad as all that; he'll improve. Anyway, that bastard of a part would beat Olivier himself. Was there ever such a poor fish as Romeo, since Little Rollo preached temperance to the sinful?'

`What about Juliet? Do you think her performance is ragged too?'

`No, Juliet's not too bad. I've got a great weakness for the little Winfield, if only she'd refrain-' Barry Plunkett stopped. `There's another question in your eye, learned magister. What is it?'

`For, two acts,' Knox said truthfully, `I've been striking matches to look at this programme and make sure I knew who was who. There's one fellow I can't place, though I know I've seen him on the stage.; He wears green and gold who is he?'

`That's Harry Delevan, who plays Count Paris. You know, the one called "County" Paris in the text; I've never known why. Was "county" a pet name for count in Spokeshave's day?..

`I don't know either.'

`He never has a chance, poor sod. Capulet wants him to marry, Juliet, who can't see him for toffee. All he can do is turn up outside the tomb, and get himself spitted by Romeo after only one exchange.

'Barry Plunkett's eyes had narrowed. `Any special reason for asking?'

`None at all! 'As, Lieutenant Spinelli would say, just curiosity. By the way, do you know we've got a detective lieutenant from White Plains out there?'

`Well, as they say in this country, so what? We knew he'd be here, or at least I did.'

Music, somewhat muffled, by the curtains, was swelling up to an ominous-sounding finale. Barry Plunkett's eyes had narrowed still further.

`Look here, old boy, are you sure there's nothing on your mind?'

There was much, but Knox had no intention of explaining. Instead he caught at a random remark which flew at him from earlier in the evening.

`Judge Cunningham;' he replied, `says this is quite a stage. He says it's fitted with a number of what he called almost magically engineered trap doors.'

`How right he is!'

`It's true, is it?'

`You bet it's true. Look there!' Mr Plunkett. gestured with the sword. `The apron of the stage is concrete; the rest of it isn't. Adam Cayley meant this place to be used, in off seasons of his own company, by all kinds of variety turns. And in those days, before they were practically killed along. with variety, there used to be, big travelling magic shows.

`Look! There are several traps ' - including one near the wings on this side, not far from, where we're standing - you can use without needing anybody to work it for you. You just press a button below the stage. You, walk up here; step on the trap; it takes you down. Got to be sure, though, the wrong person doesn't step on it at the wrong time. Never do in Shakespeare, would it?

`But to hell,' said Barry Plunkett with broad heartiness, to hell with trap doors and feats of engineering in general. What's Hecuba to me, or me to Hecuba? Did you hear our patron -- patroness - pouring out words of wisdom before the curtain was up?'

Out of the gloom sailed a fat, hearty woman with her jowled face glowing orange under the elaborate, headdress of Juliet's nurse.; Barry Plunkett turned.

`Philip Knox,' he said, `this is Kate Hamilton, who was with the original Westchester Players thirty-seven years ago. Did you hear our patroness, Kate?'

`Did I hear her?' said the nurse. 'Stap me, did I hear her? And the nerve of the, woman! "I once had some small reputation," ' she mimicked, ` "in the profession to which you now aspire." To which we now aspire, for Jesus Christ's sake? The nerve of the woman!'

`She's a talented bitch,' said Mr Plunkett, stressing the adjective. 'And we can be thankful nobody's going to die on the stage this time. Just a minute, Knox old boy. You were speaking of Judge Cunningham, weren't you? Here comes Judge Cunningham now, with a light in his eye. Who's that with him, having a light; in his eye?'

`That,' returned Knox, `is the Lieutenant Spinelli I mentioned, and the light means more questions. I'm getting out of here.'

`We've got to go too,' said Barry Plunkett, `Or at least I have, and a lot of others. (PLACES, you lousy hams!) If Tybalt messes up stabbing me with the dagger, or Romeo messes it up for him when he intervenes, I'll stand up straight from. Benvolio's arms and cut both their bloody hearts out, you see if I don't.'

Philip Knox, ran.

He had checked himself by the time he opened the pass door into the auditorium. And the lights had, faded. He groped up along the end aisle, guiding himself by the backs of seats.

But he was still too restless to settle down. This act contained most of the swordplay; it would go at an even quicker tempo. Mercutio would be supported offstage to die. Romeo would kill Tybalt. Already ominous signs stirred in the hard light of the Verona street.

..I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire.

The day is hot, the Capulets abroad

And if we meet we shall not 'scape a brawl,

For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.'

Knox glanced over his shoulder.: Lieutenant Spinelli seemed to be trailing him.

All he could say was that the detective, a figure vaguely discernible by firefly glows, marched up the same aisle behind him. But already ominous shapes, perhaps nonsensical shapes, had taken form in Knox's own mind.

Halfway up he edged to his left between two rows of seats, making for the left central aisle. He reached that aisle, stopped, and turned his eyes forward.

Benvolio and Mercutio were sauntering across the stage, the former earnest and the latter at banter. From the right side of the stage - the audience's right, that is emerged black-clad Tybalt with two followers.

`By my head, here come the Capulets.'

`By my heel, I care not.'

`Follow me close for I will, speak to them '

Again Knox looked in Lieutenant Spinelli's direction. The other man, who had also stopped, was now approaching through rows of seats.'

Knox, as though meaning to leave the theatre, strode up the aisle towards the swing door. Lieutenant Spinelli -followed. Was this damned cop going to stalk him everywhere? But, come to think of it, why was he himself again almost running? What had he to fear?

Glancing up over his left shoulder, he made out Margery Vane sitting absorbed in Box C, her arms folded on the ledge. He continued up the aisle almost to the swing door. There he deliberately turned and waited.

Up stalked Lieutenant Spinelli. But, if the White Plains detective were intent to fire questions, he did not ask any. All he said was:

`Look there! That's something, isn't it?'

They both stared at the stage.

Mercutio in blue and silver had taunted black-clad Tybalt. Tybalt, intent only on finding and killing Romeo, was given opportunity by the entrance of Romeo himself. Tybalt hurled insult. Romeo, determined to spare Juliet's kinsman because of her fondness for him,

uttered soothing words which did in fact sound wishy-washy and brought Mercutio flaming to take the quarrel on himself.

`Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk?'

`What wouldst thou have with me?

`Good King o f Cats-'

and so on in challenge, with Romeo begging for peace,

`Gentle Mercutio, put thy rapier., up,'

and Mercutio's implacable,

`Cone,, sir, your passado!'

Cross-armed, Tybalt had already whipped out sword and dagger. He lunged at Mercutio, who almost contemptuously parried and slashed back. Steel flashed, and clattered; they fought hard, veering to the right with Romeo dancing beside them.

`Draw, Benvolio, beat down their weapons.

Gentlemen, for shame, forbear this outrage!

Tybalt! Mercutio!

The Prince expressly hath

Forbid this bandying in Verona streets.

Hold, Tybalt ! Good Mercutio!'

And so he stepped in - at the wrong time. Under Romeo's arm Tybalt lunged left-handed and apparently skewered Mercutio with the dagger. Tybalt and his three friends fled to the right. Mercutio, jesting bitterly even with his fatal wound `a plague a both your houses' - was supported off to the left by Benvolio, who returned after only seven lines space to report Mercutio dead.

Then Romeo flared out at last. Furious Tybalt, venturing back, was met with a bearing more furious than his own. The clash of words ended; music had crept in underneath. Romeo flung a forehand cut from which the Capulet leaped back and drove in with a backhand slash at his adversary's head.

Music grew faster with the bout. The long blades whirled and clashed, daggers darting like snakes' heads. Both Knox and Lieutenant Spinelli had unconsciously edged forward down the aisle towards the stage.

'Watch that Ferrara boy!' whispered the latter. 'Looks like the real thing, doesn't it? Looks as though they're actually trying to kill each other. Looks as though-'

He stopped. Just as Tybalt crumpled to fall, both spectators heard the noise which smote across clash of blades and skip of music. Knox, who had heard it before, knew what it was. It was the vicious snap as a released cord banged across the head of a crossbow.

Nothing had happened on the stage, except that Tybalt had fallen. The music ceased.

Philip, Knox raised his head. From where they had been standing before.. almost at the top of the left-hand aisle, they could see only, the lower edge of Box C. Now the whole box was visible. Margery Vane no longer sat there.

'Jesus-God!' whispered Lieutenant Spinelli.

From the stage Benvolio was urging Romeo to run away: the citizens were up, he said; the Prince would doom death if Romeo were taken. Knox hardly heard this, and doubted that his companion heard it either. Lieutenant Spinelli had plunged between two rows of seats to reach the right-hand aisle across the theatre. Knox raced after him.

Nor did Spinelli stop there. He plunged between two rows of the far rank of seats, as though determined to get himself underneath Box C. Knox followed. Almost together - they arrived at the end aisle.

On the red carpet of the aisle below Box C, two objects lay clearly illuminated by the little light attached to the aisle seat closest at hand. One was a collar of linked gold plates set alternately with diamonds and emeralds. Wound round the middle of the collar, holding both together, lay an elaborate diamond bracelet. Caught between both, imprisoned there, was an oblong of printed matter - with photograph - obviously cut from a newspaper.

Lieutenant, Spinelli threw back his head and made a trumpet of his hands.

'Lady Severn!' he bellowed. 'Lady Severn!'

Only briefly did it jar the actors. On the stage had poured a mob of angry citizens, to be followed closely by Prince Escalus, Montague and Capulet, with wives, and every available retainer. The lines droned on:

But Lieutenant Spinelli was badly jarred. He looked at the sprawled jewels, whose colours glowed and burned; he said, 'Sh-h!' as though he had not hitherto spoken; then, with Knox at his elbow, he raced up the aisle, along the carpeted alleyway at the rear of the auditorium, through the swing door, and up the right-hand stairs to the dress circle.

Knox was with him when they gained the shell enclosure of Box C. Inside, the little passage with its pink-shaded bulb was identical with that of Box A across the house. Lieutenant Spinelli seized the doorknob of the box.

'Still bolted!' he said, rattling it. 'I'll have to-'

'You're not going to break the door down?'

'No; why should I? You stay here, now!'

'What are you going to do?'

'The railing of the dress circle has a broad ledge. It curves when it passes the front row of seats, and then goes straight on level with the ledge of the box beyond. I'll climb up on the rail, jump from its ledge to the ledge of the box that's curved too - and get in as easy as pie.'

'For God's sake be careful. It's at least six feet, maybe more, from the end of the rail to the ledge of the box. And what can you use to balance you?'

'Those gilt rosettes and curlicues stick out like knobs. I'll be careful. Don't move from here, now!' And he left the passage, closing the door. It seemed to take an interminable time, while Knox could faintly hear Prince Escalus banishing Romeo from Verona. Then he heard a thump inside the box.

'She's here all right,' said the voice closer at hand. 'Steady; I'll unbolt the door.'

Yes, she was there. Margery Vane lay face down on the carpet, head towards the door and-arms flung wide. The iron bolt had struck her under the left shoulder-blade, and stood up at a slight angle above the shimmering silver gown. Her chair was upset; so was the little table

with glass and water-pitcher. But, though much water soaked the carpet from the fallen pitcher, only a little blood had soaked the edge of the gown and run down across her bare back.

CROSSBOW AND DIAMOND

THE CLOCK at Richbell's Methodist Church struck one in the morning.

Faintly its sound penetrated to the green `room at the Mask, which was halfway down a corridor off the wings to the right of the stage. Lighted by a student's lamp on a table in the middle, the green room appeared to be furnished with cast-off props - chairs, sofas, tables - lined round the walls under framed playbills and theatrical photographs at least forty years old.

On this furniture lay rolled-up belts, each with rapier and main-gauche, discarded there by members of the cast during their interrogation. And there were at least a dozen crossbows.

But the only crossbow in which anyone took an interest lay on the centre table under the lamp. Its stock was inlaid with ivory, and its cord was broken.

The room now had three occupants. Lieutenant Carlo Spinelli, under visible strain, fingered his chin and studied the crossbow. Philip Knox paced. Beside another table in the, corner, piled there mountain-fashion, Dr Gideon Fell sat absentmindedly rolling a pair of large red dice with white spots.

`All right!' announced Lieutenant Spinelli, showing signs of strain. `All right, now! Take it easy, you two! Let's see what we've got and where we stand.'

`What I wanted to ask-'began Knox.

`In good tune, in good time! Keep your hair on, can't you?'

`I only thought-'

`All right!' Lieutenant Spinelli's hand shook. `We found Lady Severn dead,' he said, 'at just a quarter after eleven. We stopped the show then and there; anyway, they'd gotten to the end of the first scene in the third act. And I looked down from the box, and there were the District Attorney and Dr Fell, just arrived from their gabfest at the

hotel after all damage had been done. You, Dr Fell, were wearing what looked like exactly the same cloak and shovel-hat you used to wear in England twenty years ago.'

'In point of fact,' returned Dr Fell, 'they are the same excellent hat and cloak, thank'ee. My wife wishes they were not, and returns to the subject with, persistence worthy of a better cause. Harrumph.'

'It's nearly two hours ago,' said Knox, 'and the shock's worn off. All the same, when I saw that woman with an iron bolt through her back ..'

'You were pretty steady.'

'I did firewatching duty in the London blitz, as everybody else did. And we saw worse sights in those' days. There wasn't a great deal of blood, for one thing,..'

'No; you heard what the medical examiner said - probably a direct heart wound. Death wasn't instantaneous; that kind of violent death never is, in spite of what you see on television. She lived maybe forty or fifty seconds. I lifted her head up to look at her face; you saw it too. There was pain; she felt a good deal of pain; but mainly it was just a blank look as if she couldn't understand what was happening. ' This shock you mentioned, Mr Knox ... ?'

'That came from a different cause. Margery Vane could be difficult.'

'As all women can be, you were going to say?'

'No, not necessarily. But I liked the woman; I couldn't help liking her. Her death seemed such an infernal waste.'

'They're all discovering they liked her, have you noticed?' demanded the other, between nerves and cynicism. 'At first they were inclined to laugh ha-ha, - and ridicule the old girl's whims. Then' she's killed practically under their eyes, and already they're starting' to think of her almost as a holy martyr. Now if you two will just stop gassing and interrupting me when I haven't asked for an opinion, I'll try to sum up what we've got. This damn thing, for instance.'

Here he picked up the crossbow, with the, broken cord.

Judge Cunningham said there was a wild outside chance it might fire. All right! He said the cord would break, which it has. He also said the bolt would fly wild or not fly at all, and he was wrong: the shot

went straight enough. But it was fired. Apart from the fact that we heard it, there's the fingerprint man's evidence. Not a print on this bow because it's been carefully wiped clean. The point is, where the hell was it fired from? Eh, Dr Fell?

Dr Fell did not reply, unless mysterious throat-rumblings could have been so interpreted. He threw the dice, which showed a double six, and hastily caught them up again.

'Now where did we find the thing?' pursued Lieutenant Spinelli. 'We found the bow, almost immediately, lying on the carpet of the aisle underneath Box A across the house, in almost the same position

Putting down the bow, Lieutenant Spinelli took from his pocket the gold collar with the diamonds and emeralds, the diamond bracelet, and an oblong newspaper clipping which had now been flattened out so that it could be easily read. He put these on the table and again took up the bow.

'... in almost the same position,' he said, 'as the collar and the bracelet and the piece of newspaper were found underneath Box C. Get me?'

'Your substance,' grunted Dr Fell, 'I understand perfectly.'

'OK; that figures! The bolt entered her back at a very slight oblique upwards angle. If she'd been standing up with her back turned, the only position she could have assumed without anything intervening in the line of fire, the murderer could have shot her from the opposite side of the house, either from the aisle underneath Box A or from Box A itself. That would make the angle of fire about right. But what do witnesses say?'

'Well,' said Dr Fell, puffing out his cheeks, 'let us be clear. What do they say?'

'I'll tell you: not a damn thing! Hell, sir, you were here!'

Nevertheless, would, you mind recapitulating?'

'In that auditorium," said Lieutenant Spinelli, 'there were seven witnesses.. Mrs Knox and Miss Harkness, sitting together in the front row of the dress circle. Mr and Mrs Judson Lafarge, standing together inside the swing door at the top of the right-hand central aisle downstairs. Judge Cunningham himself. He'd followed me out into the auditorium at the beginning of the third act; deafness or not, he'd got

a little tired of hearing 'em at close range from the wings, and he was at the back of the left-hand central aisle to watch the fencing. Finally, Mr Knox and myself.

`But did anybody see anything? No, nobody did! including Mr Knox and me. The last time Lady Severn is known to have been alive and well, or noticed at all, was when the two of us' saw her sitting there, intent on the play, just before the sword-fighting began. That's the only thing we know. .

`And if you're surprised,' raved Lieutenant Spinelli, 'I'm not. It's one hell of a bad break, but there you are. With two first-class sword-fights banging away one right after the other, what would witnesses be watching except that? But it leads us straight to the nut-house. Dig?'

`Oh, ah. I dig.'

`Suppose the murderer fired from Box A, or anywhere else on that side? The bow's not big or heavy, and on the underside of the stock (look!) there's a little sharp-pointed hook by which you can carry it over one finger. The murderer fires and drops the bow on the floor; with all the uproar from the stage, who'd have heard it fall on soft carpet? But-'

`That explanation,' said Dr Fell, `I also dig. But -?'

`How the hell,' roared the lieutenant, `did he get Lady Severn to stand up with her back turned? This thing was planned in advance; I'll admit that now, even if I've got to eat every word I said before. The murderer couldn't have got her to do that by signalling across the house. He couldn't have anticipated she might have stood up with her back turned, when every second so far she'd been absorbed in the stage. Don't think other explanations haven't occurred to me too.'

`Other explanations?'

'Sure! Suppose, I said to myself, the finding of the crossbow is a blind and she wasn't shot from that side of the house at all?'

`How do you mean?'

`This way. The murderer, let's suppose, creeps around to Box C with the weapon in his hand. The door of the box is bolted; Mr Knox saw her bolt it, and I found the bolt securely fastened afterwards. There's no keyhole in that door; no way of fooling with it first unbolting-; the door, then bolting it again - with a piece of string or something. `But

what if, the murderer'd found a way? After killing her and rebolting the door, he'd still have, had time to slip out and down in the dark before Mr Knox and I got to the box. He could have dropped the crossbow on the floor across the house, and there you are. Could that have happened?'

'Perhaps, though the oracle's accent is dubious. How did he hocus the door of the box?'

'Goda'mighty,' yelled Lieutenant Spinelli, 'that's what I'm asking you. In your time, Maestro, you've come up with some pretty fancy ways, of monkeying with doors and windows. But it- won't work, even allowing a trick with the bolted door, and I'll tell you why.

`I won't even mention the fact that the crossbow's a murderous weapon (hear Judge Cunningham any day in the week), which could crack open plate-armour. Fired at short range behind the poor woman's back, it would have made an unholier mess than anything I've seen since the D-Day landings in Normandy.

'No, I won't even refer to that. But the victim had to be standing up when she got it! She had to be standing up, or the back of the chair would have been in the way. Or, if for any reason she had stood up, wouldn't she - wouldn't anybody - have turned towards the door and not away from it?'

At this point Lieutenant Spinelli seemed to meditate hurling the crossbow across the room. Instead he put it down carefully beside the gold collar and the diamond bracelet.

'I've got to simmer down,' he declared. 'I'm going nuts, I tell you; my mind's dissolving like an aspirin in water. I've got to get hold of myself, damn my ornery hide, before the DA thinks I'm even more of a wild man than Flo does. So, while I shuffle around with ways, of working the trick, we'll just ask ourselves: who could have done it?'

'And who could have?'

'We-ell!' The lieutenant produced his notebook. 'According to this, anyway, most of the people we might have suspected - among' the spectators, or on the stage and backstage - seem to be pretty well out of it. But I'm counting on your help, Maestro. This is the battiest thing I ever came across; it's crazy enough to suit even you.'

'The old sweet song,' Dr Fell observed, not without sadness. 'Never have the police more pithily stated their need to summon me from the

lunatic asylum.'

`Well?'

For a moment Dr Fell, pondered, wry chuckles running up the ridges of his waistcoat. Then he threw the dice.

`Five and three!' he rumbled, childishly, absorbed. `Ten bucks!' he added, pointing to imaginary money on the table. `I say, my dear Knox, how would you construe into Latin the following text? "Eight's my point, Ada from Decatur! Shoot the ten bucks; who fades me?"'

Knox reflected.

`Dr Johnson, I suspect, would have had no trouble with that one. Boswell, according to his, journals a compulsive gambler with cards, would have been shooting craps constantly if the game had been invented then. We could use "number" for "point", couldn't we? Numerus octonus est, would it be? But a noble Roman rendering of "ten bucks" or "fade" is more difficult. And would "from Decatur" take the genitive or the ablative?'

`Well, for God's sake!' Lieutenant Spinelli looked angrily at Knox. `I've known the maestro do this kind of thing before, but don't you get in the act too. Just forget what Johnson said to Boswell in a crap game, and keep your minds on business.

`Listen, Maestro!' he went on. `You weren't exactly asleep when I was questioning witnesses, and you weren't all that preoccupied learning the principles of crap shooting. You asked some questions yourself, I seem to remember.'

`Quite true,' agreed Dr Fell. 'But my questions, if you recall, were to reconstruct the events of the evening before the play began.'

`That's important?'

`I venture to think so. I have been, put, as they say, in the picture.'

`Then it's more than I have,' snapped Lieutenant Spinelli, `except to be framed like one. And I've tried to tell you: most people, the ones we'll call the possibles, are out of it because they've got alibis. I don't distrust alibis, mind, unless they're cooked up by professional hoods. Even your wife, Mr Knox, seems to be in the clear.'

"Even" my wife.' Knox spoke with restraint. `As between one

comforter and another, Lieutenant, give me job's any time.'

`Well, you heard what Mr and Mrs Lafarge both said! Just before Lady Severn made her speech and the play started, she had one beauty of a row with Mrs Knox. Or, at least, she pitched into Mrs Knox and your wife didn't answer back. I want to know what the caper was about, and I'm going to know. I don't think your wife fired the crossbow; five gets you ten no woman fired it ...'

`Agreed without a struggle,' grunted Dr Fell.

`But I've got to find a solution of this problem; that's my job; I intend to find one whether I behave like a gentleman or not.'

`All right!' said Knox. `It brings me to the question I've been trying to ask for some time. If all you want is the solution of the mystery, and you agree Judy is as completely in the clear as your own Flo, why are you still hammering away at her when it's past one in the morning?'

`Who's hammering away at her? Am I?'

`I didn't mean you personally. I meant ...'

Lieutenant Spinelli jammed his notebook back in his pocket.

`Look!' he went on. `You were here; you saw what happened. I took statements from witnesses. Towards the end Mr District Attorney Gulick, who'd been standing by and telling me to do it, jumped in with both feet and chewed me out for letting this happen, I goofed? So OK; I goofed, though I'm not so sure how he'd have prevented it.

`Anyway, he said he wanted to question Mrs Knox himself. He took her up to the place they call the office, the one Mr Lafarge uses. That was less than half an hour ago; I can't see it was any great imposition. The other witnesses are still penned up somewhere, in one room or another, and they're not howling more than most witnesses do.

`Still, you're a pretty good guy; I'd like to oblige you if I can. So we'll just go up there and see what's happening. The maestro will be Dr Johnson; you be Boswell, I'll be the Bow Street magistrate taking advice from you both.

`Now get this! I've got to remember politics in my job. Herm Gulick's the DA; he is a wheel in this county; don't let's any of us forget it. But he's got to keep on his own side of the fence and off my

back. Coming, Maestro?'

He did not touch the crossbow. Dropping bracelet and gold collar into the side pocket of, his coat, he carefully tucked the newspaper clipping into an upper vest pocket, while Knox and Dr Fell both kept their eyes on him. Then he led the way out

They crossed the stage under ghostly lights. They went along the corridor opposite, past closed dressing-room-doors from behind which rose a buzz of talk, down the steps to the pass door, and up through the auditorium. As they crossed the foyer and ascended the right-hand stairs to dress circle level, Lieutenant Spinelli was still talking.

'It's no use, it's no use at all, asking who could have swiped that crossbow from underneath the painting. Answer: anybody!'

'Anybody?' inquired Dr Fell, lumbering on the crutchheaded stick.

'Anybody at all, either from among the few spectators or coming from back-stage. In the lobby - you've been calling it a foyer - there's still another door you can't see at all unless- the lights are full on. It leads to the alley west of the theatre, on the same side as the- stage door.'

'Well?'

'The stage-door-keeper, who was on duty all evening, thinks somebody (quote) "in costume" did sneak out for a couple of minutes and sneak back in again. He's not sure who it was, and

'The errand may have been innocent?'

'Or it may not; we don't know. You couldn't stick that crossbow in your pocket or hide it under your coat; but, if you pushed it under a seat, who'd notice? One thing we can be sure of though.'

They were approaching a dark, polished door at the level of the dress circle. On either side of it stood a uniformed policeman.

'One thing we can be sure of,' pursued Lieutenant Spinelli, 'both by the testimony-of the stage-door-keeper and of Nancy Trimble, the girl at the box office. No outsider came into the theatre at any time tonight.' Whoever did this is still-' He broke off, opening the door. 'Excuse me, sir; mind- if I barge in?'

It was a good-sized office with two shrouded windows, a flat-topped

desk, a steel filing cabinet, and a number of straight chairs. At the desk, his back to the newcomers, sat stocky Mr Herman Gulick, he of the portentous manner and bushy hair. In a straight chair in front of him was Judy, with a face of near-collapse. Nearby was Elizabeth Harkness, also just bearing up. In one corner, arms folded magisterially, sat Judge Graham Cunningham.

`Just, finishing,' declared the District Attorney, showing a glimpse of a sallow face as he turned his head. `Now, Mrs Knox.'

`But I've told you-!' Judy cried.

`Yes, thanks; I heard. Well, Mrs Knox, I think that will be all for tonight. I have a note of your address, in case the lieutenant didn't:...'`

`Sir, I've already got the lady's address!'

`Yes, that's what I was saying: I have it if you haven't. You may go home if you like, Mrs Knox. Don't leave New York, in case we need to question you again. But, as I say, we won't detain you now.'

`That's all?' cried Judy.

`For the moment, at least. Unless, of course-' `Unless what?'

`Unless you decide to change your mind and tell us what Lady Severn had against you.'

`Change my mind?' said, Judy. `Change my mind!'

She sprang up, gripping her handbag, and bolted out past the newcomers as they entered. Knox was after her in an instant, despite Lieutenant Spinelli's bellow- for him to come back.

Judy raced down the stairs to the foyer, still in semi darkness except for the glow above the portrait of Margery Vane. Judy veered towards the painting until she seemed to remember whose portrait it was; then she backed away, herself a picture of misery and despair, with one arm up to shield her eyes. Knox, in a rush of sympathy he felt too awkward to express, approached her without speaking.

It was Judy who appealed to him.

`Phil! You're one of the ch- charmed circle, aren't you? I mean, they don't toss you out of the room when they begin their questioning, do they?'

'No, apparently not. If there's anything I can do .

`There is, there is! Go back up there; go back straightaway. Listen very carefully to what's said, particularly to anything judge Cunningham says.'

`Why Judge Cunningham? What's he got to do with this?'

'I - I think he's on my side. The District Attorney wasn't too bad. He's fair, or he's trying to be fair. But once he really walloped me with a couple of questions. Judge Cunningham got up like a Roman emperor and said, "Take care, sir. If this witness needs help, I am at her service." '

`If you need help, Judy, why not let me help you? Or Dr Fell? When he gets going,..'

`He'd better get going soon, then. This is awful! You will go back up there, won't you? Please, dear-!'

`What did you call me?'

`I called you dear. I'm so wretched I can't think of anything else. I won't go home; I'll wait for you in the green room. Will you go up there now, and afterwards tell me everything they say? Will you?'

`Yes, I will. And I promise help too.'

Knox stalked back up the stairs.

`I think he's on my side,' Judy had said, referring to Judge Cunningham. Why in God's name, should she need anybody on her side? Never mind. She thought she did, and this was all that mattered.

He himself, he reflected, had not been using his wits well tonight. Though it might be vanity, Philip Knox flattered himself that his wits were pretty, good. He must use them now; he must dredge up certain cloudy matters he remembered from earlier in the evening; loving Judy, he must help her over what looked like the worst patch of her life. Squaring his shoulders, drawing a deep breath, he nodded casually to the policemen outside the office door.

And he opened the door on fast-rushing events.

10 ACTOR'S MASK

`Now, MAAM-' continued the District' Attorney.

Mr Gulick, even his back seeming weighty and portentous, was standing up behind the desk. Well beyond him, strangely inconspicuous, Dr Gideon Fell stood swaying like a tethered elephant. At Dr Fell's side Lieutenant Spinelli had the air of a man who at any moment may commence to wave his fists and yell.

In a straight chair across from the District Attorney, also facing him, Elizabeth Harkness raised reddish blue eyes behind the spectacles and gripped her hands hard together.

`Now, ma'am, can I depend on that? Can I depend on what Mrs Knox was saying? Between a quarter to ten, when the rehearsal started, and a quarter after eleven, when Lieutenant Spinelli saw fit to stop it, Mrs Knox was with you the whole time?'

`She didn't leave the seat for one second!' breathed Miss Harkness, with sincerity and obvious truth. `And any notion of firing that ridiculous crossbow, about her or me either - it's more than absurd; it's, grotesque!'

`I see,' Mr Gulick said after a pause. `Well, Lieutenant?'

`Well, sir?'

`Having botched the whole business thus far, Lieutenant, perhaps you'd care to retrieve lost face by questioning this lady further? If so, I'll be off.'

'Off sir?'

`First, I want to tell those witnesses downstairs they're now free to go home. You're handling this case; I won't interfere; but there are limits, you know. Do you object, Lieutenant Spinelli, to my releasing the witnesses?'

`Well, sir . . .'

`I take it, then, you do not object. Let it be so ordered. After that, with a heavy day tomorrow, I'm off home.''

`Gulick, my dear fellow,' Dr Fell said massively, 'I am your guest, An inspired bit of typography in a local newspaper, with more candour than kindness, recently described me as a house guest. Shall I find my admirable hat and accompany you?'

`Wouldn't have it for the world!' declared, Mr Gulick with great heartiness. `Let's hope, with your aid Lieutenant Spinelli can get

himself out of the mess he's made. I want no part of it, thanks. When you've finished here, he can bring you home in a police car. Good night all, Good luck, Lieutenant, of which you're going to need plenty. Good night!"

The door closed. And nobody could accuse Lieutenant Spinelli of lacking tact.

`What I say,' he announced, addressing Bess Harkness without comment on the District Attorney's departure, `what I say is: there are one or two questions I'd like to get cleared up. But I think, ma'am, you knew Dr Fell on shipboard.

And I think you'd feel happier, all the way round, if I didn't ask the questions and he did. OK?'

`Yes,' said Miss Harkness, `I should feel happier. OK.'

`Take the desk chair Maestro '

Dr Fell did so, his bulk causing it to creak and crack alarmingly as he lowered himself on his stick.

`This evening, madam, I believe' the late Lady Severn - forgive me ! - assured Lieutenant; Spinelli that anything known to her would also be known to you. Was that true?'

`It was certainly true in most respects. Not in all respects, though. There were some things Margery didn't tell me because that was her nature. There were some things I never told her because I didn't dare.'

`Do you know, for instance,' why she "pitched into" Mrs Knox shortly before the beginning of the dress rehearsal?'

'No, 'I do not. You see -'

'Yes?'

`It was nearly twenty years ago. They only met once, during a nightmare crossing by Queen Elizabeth with wartime regulations still in force. But you've heard about that crossing.'

`Not everything, I fear.'

`Mrs Knox didn't wear rings at that time, either. And she did call herself Dorothy Knox; that's true! I know now - she told me tonight - it was because she was trying to get away from her husband and pretend

she wasn't married. There was no passenger list, and she wouldn't have to show her passport to anybody except the immigration authorities on this side. Not very terrible, was it?

`No, but-'

`She and Margery had a, quarrel or a run-in of some kind. It was pretty violent, though I can't say what it was about because Margery refused to tell me and tonight Dor - Judy Knox wouldn't utter a word herself. But that can't have been so very terrible, can it? You-see, I - I knew Margery's moods. I've known her for more than forty years.'

`Are you also, may I ask, from Montclair, New Jersey?'

`I'm a native New Yorker; I was born on West 23rd Street in the old Chelsea district. My father and mother were great friends of Dr and Mrs Vane - all dead now, like Margery herself. They were always taking me visiting, there when Margery and I were both small girls, and we became practically inseparable. Knowing her moods ...'

At this point Philip Knox, dazed with inspiration, took a stride forward.

`May I ask a question?' he demanded.

He hesitated, catching the rather sardonic eye of Judge

Cunningham in the corner, but Judy was behind this and he rushed on.

`Forgive me for butting in. I'm only Boswell, the stooge who's always getting into trouble and having to be hauled out. But MAY I ask a question?'

`Sure; why not?' Lieutenant Spinelli waved a tolerant hand. 'Go right ahead, Mr Bos - go right ahead, Mr Knox; let's hear what's on your mind.'

'Miss Harkness,' said Knox, 'I've got to ask several questions in order to lead up to my question. Here we go. Do you remember returning from dinner this evening? Miss Vane walked into the theatre when Barry Plunkett and I were fencing, and you were just behind her. Do you recall that?'

`Yes, of c-course! Why?'

`A dispute arose about recognizing Judy or not recognizing her. You told Miss Vane she didn't really have the good memory for faces she thought she had. Then you reminded her of a certain press clipping - you called it a clipping; she called it a cutting as they do in]England - which somebody at Richbell had sent her, presumably while she was still in Florida. Remember that too?'

`Yes! I said. ...'

`You said something like, "Margery, you didn't even recognize the same man on the Illyria. And I didn't tell you; I couldn't!" Now, Miss Harkness. Was that clipping the same clipping which is now in Lieutenant Spinelli's upper left-hand vest pocket? And may we have it

out, Lieutenant?'

Willing if heavily puzzled, Lieutenant Spinelli drew out the now-folded piece of paper and handed it to Knox, who unfolded it. He had read it before, but he read it again.

It had been a short, obscure news story buried on some inside page. Across it, in pencil and in block letters, some body had printed the words 'World-Telegram, April 13th'. The accompanying reproduction of a photograph, which showed the face of a hollow-cheeked, sickly old man, withered and nearly bald, bore the newspaper's caption, 'Luther McIlvey'.

The story itself said that a man hitherto uncertainly identified, who had been found the previous evening unconscious from an overdose of barbiturates in his room at the Elsinore Hotel, West 43rd Street, and had died in hospital next morning' without recovering consciousness, was now known, by a passport found among his belongings, to be Luther McIlvey, sixty-one, an unemployed journalist.

'It is almost certain, police state, that the overdose of barbiturates was self-administered. For weeks McIlvey had been low in funds and spirits, claiming he was finished because he could find no work. Passport stamps show that in January he returned to America after a long stay abroad in several countries. Police refused to comment on the fact that among his scanty possessions they found a lifelike head-and-face mask, of rubber or plastic, forming the countenance of a very young man.'

Again Knox read the item. Then he pushed it across the desk to Miss Harkness. Under the bright hanging lamp she read it through, shielding her eyes, with an unsteady hand.

'Well, ma'am?' demanded Lieutenant Spinelli. 'You heard what the man said. Is that the same clipping?'

'How can I be sure? It looks like the same one, certainly; I remember this pencil printing of "World-Telegram", and the date. I usually get the New York papers wherever I am, but I missed this. It's a; very small headline, isn't it? I never saw it, if it is the same one, until it arrived for Margery out of the blue.'

'When?'

'One day last week: Wednesday or Thursday, I think.' 'Who sent it?'

`There was nothing to show who sent it. It was in an envelope with an air-mail stamp, postmarked Richbell and correctly addressed to her in Miami.'

`Addressed to Lady Severn or to Margery Vane?' ` "Miss Margery Vane".'

`Who in Richbell or hereabouts knew her address in Florida?'

`If I may be permitted to, answer that,' observed Judge Cunningham, rising gravely and holding the lapels of his coat, `I think I am safe in saying we all did. The lady arrived from, England in January, and was at the Berkshire Hotel in New York. Mr Plunkett, who was then living in New York - he is at New Rochelle now - went to see her. Judson Lafarge also went in to see her. Then, since the lady was investing a considerable sum of money, as well as giving us the theatre, Lafarge suggested that anyone who cared to send her a note of thanks might well do so. Lafarge said:

`Hoy!' interposed, Judson Lafarge himself, opening the door at that moment. `Who's taking my name in vain? Look, Lieutenant: mind if I put my head in my own office?'

`No; stick around.'

Moon-faced, choleric, clearly, tired but quenchlessly energetic, Lafarge stood holding open the door.

`I can only stay a second,' he said. `I've got to go home. My wife's worn out and she's saying a lot of things,, so I'd better. Herm Gulick has released that mob of actors, and do you know what- those lunatics are saying? They're saying they'll do the show tomorrow night, just as planned; they say the da - they say the poor unfortunate woman would have wanted it that way.'

`We're all sorry about; this,' raved Lieutenant Spinelli. `If it's all the same to you, though, we'll get back to business. I don't want to harass you, Miss Harkness. But about this clipping in the envelope: Lady Severn didn't keep the envelope, did she?'

`I expect so; she kept, most things. She seems to have kept the clipping, if it's the same one. Where did you, get it?' `Well, ma'am ...'

`Pleases' begged Bess Harker. 'You didn't say one word about it when you first questioned me downstairs. Where did you get it?'

`Well, ma'am, that's a long story. Let's just say that early this evening a certain man was seen to steal two very valuable pieces of jewellery out of Lady Severn's hotel room in White Plains. Later they both turned up in the aisle under Box C, one wound around the other with the clipping between 'em. I don't know-how they landed there, and I've got the stuff in my pocket now.' Lieutenant' Spinelli touched the pocket. `But I'd prefer not to go into that matter now. As for why I never mentioned the clipping before this, I couldn't see how it figured in the business and I still don't.'

'Then don't expect me to understand, I implore you! The anonymously sent clipping arrived last Wednesday or Thursday. Cut from the newspaper on Tuesday and sent air-mail, that would be about right. Margery hadn't the least idea what it meant; if she thought something didn't touch her personally, she never stopped to consider. I could have told her, as I could have told her on shipboard. But I didn't have the heart.'

`Yes,' agreed- Philip Knox. `And now may I ask my question?'

`You mean you haven't asked it, Mr Knox?'

`All the others had to lead up to the real one. Will you pass the clipping round, please so that everyone can see it?'

Miss Harkness did so, and then sat back with the reddish sanded look deepening in her eyes.

`Now, then!'" continued Knox. `You'll notice that the story describes Luther, McIlvey, aged sixty-one, as an unemployed journalist. But "journalist" is a word American newspapers very; seldom use; it was probably taken from the passport.' Here he looked at the woman opposite. 'Luther McIlvey was an unemployed actor, I think? Wasn't his stage name John Fosdick?'

The woman nodded. 'Yes,' she said.

There was a silence as at the stroke of a gong.

'Bull's eye!' said Dr Gideon Fell, whacking' his fist down on the desk. 'Whang in the gold, my dear, fellow; we shall consult Boswell more frequently henceforward.'

`Pardon my French. But just what the hell,' burst out Lieutenant Spinelli, `is all this?'

'In 1928, Lieutenant,' explained Dr Fell, 'John Fosdick was a promising young actor with the original Westchester Players. Towards him Miss Vane conceived a violent if unreasoning dislike. After Adam Cayley's death she sacked him from the company. He presently disappeared. What had happened to him nobody professed to know. But I think we have learned what eventually happened.

'He is dead now, poor devil; she is dead too. Yet he predeceased her by five days; he no longer need be considered a suspect, if indeed he ever was one. She failed to recognize him when he travelled by the liner Illyria, doubtless in tourist class. When someone at Richbell sent her that press cutting with the photograph, presumably as a reminder, in the aged and shrivelled face of that photograph she saw no trace of the handsome young man he must once have been. As for those wild events aboard Illyria on the night a shot was fired ...'

Briefly, succinctly Dr Fell recapitulated the known facts of the night.

'That, ladies and gentlemen, is what happened. How it came to happen and what it meant, I suggest,' we can see with tolerable clearness.'

'Frankly,' retorted Knox, 'it's more than I can see even now. You mean Luther McIlvey, once John Fosdick, fired the shot at her?'

'Sir, he fired at nobody.'

'Damn it, Dr Fell, there was a bullet in the wall!'

'True, but what does that mean? Archons of Athens! Your thinking-cap becomes you; continue to wear it and you will see. With your permission, good friends, let us leave that to consider another aspect of the same situation. I doubt that John Fosdick cherished rancour to any great extent. And yet Margery Vane, I fear, did very much cherish rancour over all those years. She would still be even with the man who once offended her. In her own words, she would fix his wagon. Mr Lafarge, may I have your attention?'

Judson Lafarge still gripped the edge of the door.

'Look,' he exclaimed, 'I've got to go home. I'm in the doghouse already, and Connie says ...'

'Mr Lafarge,' interposed Lieutenant Spinelli, 'let's have a little cooperation, shall we? If you think you've got matrimonial troubles, you ought to hear mine. Be quiet and listen to the maestro, can't you?'

`She says I encourage people to fight duels with real swords. She says I'm probably behind this murder, even if I don't know it. And I wish,' Mr Lafarge flew off at a new grievance, `I wish I knew what's with the God-damn actors, or at least what's with Barry Plunkett and Anne Winfield. I think he's crazy about her, though you'd never guess it from the way he talks. Then there's something else. If they're all screwy enough to put on this show tomorrow night, not a mug will turn up to see it and we'll go broke as I've always prophesied.'

`Or else,' commented Dr Fell, `you will have a far larger crowd than you ever hoped for. Mr Lafarge! This evening, in discussing events before the tragedy I was not here, but it has been reported - you expressed the gratitude felt- by the management of the Margery Vane Players towards the woman whose name they bear. "She wants something done, we do it. She doesn't want us to hire somebody, we don't hire him." Did you, make use of those words, sir?'

`Damn whistling I did. She handed me a cheque for fifty thousand bucks, didn't she?'

`Am I correct in assuming she made one "stipulation: that under no circumstances would you employ an actor named John Fosdick?'

`That funny old guy in the photograph? Yes! Ask Barry Plunkett!'

`Had McIlvey, or Fosdick, applied for work?'

`Oh, he'd applied. He could hardly walk or talk straight; we couldn't have used him anyway, though Barry got softhearted and was half inclined to give it a whirl. Lose fifty thousand smackers, would we? And now I'm off, or Connie won't shut up all night. If the cops want me, they know where to find me. Be seeing you.'

The door banged after him. Dr Fell sat back, puffing out his cheeks.

`Harrumph,' he said. `I imagine, Miss Harkness, your employer never told you that one of her objects in visiting this country was to spike Fosdick's guns if he should attempt to join the new company?'

`That's the sort of thing Margery wouldn't tell anybody! I'm not defending her; but we can't help the sort of people we like or dislike, can we?'

`Madam, I should be the last to deny it. Is there any way

believed it; she's the closest friend Lady Severn had on earth; I

believed it too. And so, as the DA will tell you, I goofed.'

'You goofed?' cried Bess Harkness. 'If that word means what I think it does, you goofed? What was happening to the silly old hag of a closest friend? Where's the instinct or intuition we're supposed to have? Somebody was after Margery. Somebody from this district sent her that clipping; it was a warning she didn't understand and I didn't take. Somebody trapped her and killed her. And I sat and laughed!'

'Now, ma'am-!'

'If you will excuse me,' interrupted judge Cunningham, rising up and taking his hat from the top of the filing cabinet, 'the hour is late; I am no longer a young man; I fear I must bid you goodnight. Dr Fell, I shall, hope to see more of you before your departure. Miss Harkness, my profoundest sympathy. Philip my boy, long life and happiness both to you and your wife. Lieutenant Spinelli,, the best of luck. And now goodnight.'

Once more the door closed.

Bess Harkness sat motionless, hands clenched. The tears which had been threatening for some time gathered and ran down, smudging one spectacle lens as they ran.

'Why won't any of them understand me?' she asked. 'They don't, you know. They just can't see I could be very fond of Margery without any foolishness about it and without wanting anything from her either. I don't amount to much in this world, I know. Maybe, if all balances were adjusted and all wrongs righted, Margery didn't amount to much herself. But she was all I had, and she's gone! What do I do now?'

For some time nobody spoke.

Dr Fell was really moved. Face fiery, asthmatic rumblings in his throat, he surged to his feet and stood towering uncertainly. He blinked round the walls, at pictures of film stars which recalled the Mask's days as a cinema, at the filing cabinet, at a little bookcase with nothing in it. He ran a hand through his great mop of hair. He tugged at the bandit's moustache; he glowered at Lieutenant Spinelli. But all he said was:

'Have patience, madam. She shall be avenged.'

LATE NIGHT

'THIS WAY,' said Lieutenant Spinelli. 'Follow me.'

'It doesn't in the least matter,' said Dr Fell, 'but where are we going? You've done everything except whisper, "Hist!" and walk on tiptoe. Where are we going?'

'Follow- me; you'll see. Last one out of the office touch that lightswitch by the door.'

Again the three investigators were alone. Escorted by the hired Rolls-Royce's hired chauffeur, all evening refreshing himself with modest beers at the Lone Tree Tavern but remaining sober and competent, Miss Harkness had been driven back to what must prove a none-too-cheery suite at the hotel in White Plains. The two uniformed policemen had been dismissed for the night.

In single file like stage conspirators - first Lieutenant Spinelli, then Dr Fell, Philip Knox at the rear - they left the office as the distant church clock struck two. Producing a large cigarette lighter, Lieutenant Spinelli twitched it to broad flame and illuminated their way down nearly dark stairs to the foyer. In the middle of the foyer he paused, all swarthy face and gleam of teeth, and extended the lighter towards Knox.

'Stop here a minute,' he said. 'I want to read you something out of my notebook. Hold this thing for me, will you?'

'All right,' agreed Knox, taking it. 'But wouldn't it be simpler to turn on the lights?'

'No, no; we'd only have to turn 'em off again in a minute. I promised Mr Lafarge we wouldn't waste his electricity, but that was hours ago and I'm not just sure what I promised. Hold the lighter high!'

Knox did so.

'About the people on the stage or behind it tonight,' Lieutenant Spinelli flipped open his notebook, 'I want to read you a list of those who've got complete alibis and can't possibly be guilty. This cast of characters-'

'Speaking of the cast of characters,' interrupted Dr Fell, 'may I rise to a point of order?'

`Well, Maestro?'

`There is one person,' observed Dr Fell, 'who ought to bulk very large on our horizon. In spirit he is all over the place. Yet never was shrinking-violet so inconspicuous; we haven't even seen him or heard one word about the fellow. I refer, of course, to Lawrence Porter, who is alleged to have - stolen that jewellery you carry in your pocket. You've not even questioned the young man, at least in my hearing. Did you tackle him at all?'

`Did I tackle him?' breathed Lieutenant Spinelli. 'Oh, man, did I tackle him?'

`He's been turned loose with the rest of the witnesses, I daresay?'

`Not so you could notice it he hasn't. He's locked up in a room by himself - in the cellar, the only place available - and I've got the key. I took a crack at that gigolo before I got on to the other witnesses. But I'd better warn you of one thing here and now.'

`Yes?'

`We can't possibly tag him with the murder; he's got an alibi as big as a house. Provided he holds out, which he may do, we can't even tag him with theft and make it stick; the only witness to the theft is dead.'

`Would you mind; telling us what he did this evening? Or says he did?'

`OK! At the beginning of the rehearsal I was, tailing him myself. But he went behind the scenes, it seems. For the whole play he was accosting people or badgering 'em, in sight all the time. At the beginning, of the third act he enticed two women into the green room ...'

`Enticed two women into-the, green room?' exclaimed Knox. 'Who were the women?'

`No, no! Not for what you're thinking, if you were thinking it. The two women were the old dame called Kate Hamilton, who plays the nurse, and the one who plays Lady, Capulet; I don't remember her name offhand, but I've got it here.

`Porter got 'em into a crap game. They'd both been playing earlier in the, evening, I gather. The nurse isn't onstage until the second scene of the third act the first scene, is a long one, with all the hoopla in it -

and Lady Capulet isn't on until the very end of the first scene.

`Lady Capulet had the dice, and they were hot. She took the others for about twenty bucks apiece. Just before the end of the scene she lost the dice and rushed away to go onstage. But by that time Margery Vane was dead. The dice passed to the nurse, who threw a seven on the first roll and then started taking Porter for more dough. They were still at it when the show was stopped. Result for Porter? An alibi that in the old days would have exonerated Capone himself. Therefore – ‘

`All this,' Dr Fell said with some intensity, `is deeply engrossing. 'But what does Porter say? What did he say when you tackled him about the jewels?'

`He says Lady Severn stole 'em herself. He says he saw her.'

`Lady Severn stole her own jewels? Yet I presume it was not-?'

`Not a fake theft for publicity purposes or to collect insurance? No,' said Lieutenant Spinelli, `I can't think of anything more unlikely. But this is a damn fishy case, Maestro; it gets fishier every minute.' What were the gold collar and the bracelet and the newspaper, clipping doing in the aisle underneath Box C?'

'At the moment there seems no definite answer.'

`I don't- say Porter's not guilty; I think he's as guilty as hell. All the same, if he lifted the stuff why did he return it? Or suppose,' continued Lieutenant Spinelli, in the wavering lighter flame looking a little like a Borgia at a feast, `suppose Lady Severn did take the stuff after all? We can't say those jewels are irrelevant or not connected with the murder. Before I handled 'em there wasn't a fingerprint on 'em; they'd been wiped clean. Lady Severn had the newspaper clipping. What if she had the collar and the bracelet too, and was working some funny business of her own? Don't you agree she was the type who would?'

`Yes,' assented Dr Fell, `I fear she was the type who would.'

`If only I could think how the murder was committed...! Now we're going to see Lawrence Porter; that's where we are going; we'll give that smoothie a grilling he won't forget in a hurry. Meantime, however ... Is anything wrong,- Mr Knox?'

'Do you still want me to stand here like the Statue of Liberty?'

`Yes, but hold the torch a little higher! Here's the list - actors, actresses, so on - of those with unquestionable alibis. Wash out musicians and stagehands; they're accounted for. Benny Meyer, the orchestra leader, was practically dead himself by a quarter after eleven.

`"Anthony Ferrara, Romeo. On stage at all critical times: alibi." He's all right, that boy! "Lee Huxley, Tybalt. Same as for Romeo: alibi." Tybalt's pretended death must have been at the same tune as the real one. "Ben Radford, Benvolio. Left stage only to support wounded Mercutio, gone only twenty seconds, presence in wings testified to by all others on stage watching for his return. -Result: alibi'.

Here Lieutenant Spinelli cleared his throat.

"Anne Winfield, Juliet, and Harry Delevan, Paris." Juliet, like the nurse isn't on again until the second scene of the third act, and Paris not until much later. Let's see what we've got. "Anne Winfield, Juliet, and Harry Delevan, Paris. Together in Paris's upstairs dressing room, otherwise empty; Paris's dressing room shared by Tybalt and Benvolio, then on stage. Result: alibi."

`You see it, don't you? Since we've already eliminated the nurse and Lady Capulet, who were in a crap game with Porter, that takes care of seven people already.'

`There's one other character,' suggested Knox, `who's very much on the stage until he has to die: Mercutio, played by Barry Plunkett. I take it you've eliminated him too?'

`Well, now!' said Lieutenant Spinelli. `About that, Mr Knox-' He broke off. `Hello there, Mrs Knox! I thought you'd gone long ago. Waiting for your husband?'

Judy, rather pale but with the amber eyes intent, had pushed through the left-hand swing door to the auditorium.

The broad yellow flame of the lighter threw unsteady weights of shadow.

`Yes, I have been waiting for him. And it has been a long time; it's seemed like hours and hours. Haven't you finished yet?'

`I'm afraid not, Mrs Knox.'

`This place has a perfectly horrible atmosphere. May I stay with the

rest of you, then, until you do finish?'

'I'm .afraid, Mrs Knox,' the lieutenant told her indulgently, 'you can't go with us where we're going. It's to interview a crooked gigolo who stole some jewellery; it'll be nothing you'll want to see. I wish, though, I could have talked to some of the actors first, especially Barry Plunkett. However, since they've all gone..'

`But they haven't all gone! The excruciatingly humorous

Mr Plunkett is still here, and Anne Winfield, and somebody else. I've been waiting in the green room; and, when I passed the other side to come out here ..'

`You've been waiting in the green room?' 'Yes.'

`Did you turn out the lights when you left?'

`Good heavens, no! The atmosphere of this place – you think things are following you...'

`Come!' said Dr Gideon Fell. 'With the best will in the world, Lieutenant; hang the lights! This sudden passion for economy--'

`What's the matter with economy?' demanded a voice from the west side of the foyer.

It was their second interruption. Towards the lighter flame ducked the round face and balding head of Judson Lafarge. He had only emerged from a door to the alley on that side, though he seemed to materialize through the pink and white wall.

'I'm back!' he announced somewhat loftily. 'So we see,' said Lieutenant Spinelli.

'I sneaked back,' said Mr Lafarge. 'I drove Connie to Farleigh, I gave her a couple of sleeping pills, and I sneaked back. There was something I forgot to tell you. It hasn't been on my conscience, exactly; it's not that important. But I had to get it off my chest or bust. It's about the balcony.'

`The balcony?' Dr Fell asked in an odd tone.

'Yeah. All night I've been half expecting a visit from Weary Willie, the tramp who infests this place when he can get in. Willie's favourite haunt is the balcony. He says there are fewer bugs there, though why there should be any bugs at all, after the price we paid to get the God-

damn place cleaned and fumigated, is more than I can tell you.

`Our night watchman, Hans Wagner - no kidding; his name really is Hans Wagner; no relation to the old-time ballplayer promised to keep an eye open. And apparently Willie didn't show up. But that reminds me.

Look!' continued Mr Lafarge, fixing his gaze on Judy. `Earlier this evening some time, didn't I hear Barry Plunkett telling Lady Severn the only way up to the upper boxes, B and D, was by the outside entrance to the balcony?'

`Yes,' replied Judy. `I was there when he said it.'

`Then he ought to learn more about the theatre where he's supposed to be the director. You can get to the upper boxes by the balcony stairs, sure. But Adam Cayley - it's been quoted to me often enough - old Adam Cayley thought that people with money enough to pay- for a box mightn't want to crowd up the gallery stairs and mingle with the hoi polloi. If you've got a box ticket, see, you just go up by way of the dress circle.'

`Mr Lafarge,' cried Judy, `please don't glare at me. I'm not denying it!'

`Sorry, Judy; didn't mean to bug you. Anyway! In the little corridor outside each lower box there's a little iron staircase leading to the corridor outside the box above. Hear me, everybody? I came to say it, and I've said it. But that's not all! What kind of a jollification, are you, people putting on at two o'clock in the morning?'

`Jollification?' asked Lieutenant Spinelli.

`That's what I said. I left; my car, in the alley this time; I'll be a son-of-a-bitch if I get more parking tickets ... !'

`You wouldn't get a parking ticket at two o'clock in the morning, Mr Lafarge.'

'I'm glad the cops have some sense. Anyway, there are lights in the dressing rooms; or at least one dressing room on the upper floor.' His tone grew tired and bitter. `It's the God-damn actors, I suppose? What may be going on in that dressing room is something Connie'd better not hear about and I don't want to know either.'

`Something tells me, sir,' remarked Dr Fell, `that Lieutenant Spinelli

is about to charge' back for causerie with the God-damn actors. Do you care to accompany us?'

'No,-. thanks; I'll get back home. Connie'll scalp' me if those sleeping pills haven't taken over. If you catch Weary Willie - and something, tells me he's not far away - just let him know we're not fooling this time and we'll prosecute his ears off. See you.'

Once more he took his departure.

`Come along, then,' said Lieutenant Spinelli. `You can blow out the lighter, Mr Knox. But there's ' no reason, Maestro, for you of all people to use strong language about a small thing. And you can come with us - Mrs Knox, if you really feel nervous. Any interview with the actors should be a mere formality.'

Lieutenant Spinelli was wrong.

Again in a kind of procession, though this time having Dr Fell in the lead with the detective while Judy fell back to take Knox's arm, they marched: down through an auditorium where most of the house lights were out. Before they reached the pass door, to go behind the scenes, Dr Fell drew back a little too. Utterly absorbed, vacant-eyed, he was muttering to himself in a voice like wind along an Underground Tunnel.

'Hans Wagner' he repeated, as though uttering an invocation. 'Hans Wagner, Hans Wagner, Hans Wagner!'

Lieutenant Spinelli held open the pass door. In single file, Judy first, Knox after her, then Dr Fell' - and the lieutenant, they mounted the steps to the concrete-floored corridor with the line of dressing rooms doors on the left. Lights still shone palely down. At the back of the corridor a flight of concrete stairs with an iron handrail ascended towards more dressing rooms on the floor above. The newcomers were halfway towards these stairs when the whole corridor seemed to go mad. Somebody erupted into it.

The person who erupted into it was a tallish, wiry young man in a charcoal-grey suit. Hitherto Knox had seen him only in the green and gold costume of Count Paris. And he erupted into the corridor because, gripped by the back of his collar and the slack of his trousers, he was flung bodily down the concrete stairs.

He landed feet first, but staggering. He fell hard, skagging the left knee of his trousers and the palms of both hands. Then he was up

again. Before he whirled to face the stairs, they saw tears of sheer rage in Harry Delevan's eyes.

Down the stairs sauntered Barry Plunkett, still in the blue and silver of Mercutio, but with swordbelt discarded and makeup Wiped away. He stopped about eight treads up, looking down and dusting his hands.

`Did you hear what I said?' yelled the actor manager. `Clear out of here- and don't come back. If we can't find another Paris by tomorrow night, we'll get the janitor to play it and do us proud.'

`You'll suffer for this, Mr Barry Plunkett!'

`Here I am. Want some more of it?'

'I'll not fool around; why should I? I'll get Equity after you!'

`You do that, rat, and it won't be enough to beat you up. I'll put steel through your bloody heart and have done with it.'

`Like you did with Margery Vane?'

Mr Plunkett assumed an oratorical stance.

`Now listen, my ignorant oaf. It would gladden this soul of mine if so many people in this country, including not a few public men and all television commercials, would stop using "like" as a conjunction. The practice so revolts me that I can't speak with my customary moderation. "As" I did with Margery Vane, you randy bastard! As I did with Margery Vane, you illiterate lout!'

Lieutenant Spinelli strolled forward with an air of amiability.

`Well, Mr Plunkett, let's not quibble. Between ourselves, now, just how did you kill Margery Vane?'

`But I didn't kill her! -Out!' he added to the other actor. `I think ...'

'OUT!' roared Barry Plunkett. Young Delevan discreetly fled.

Lieutenant Spinelli had paid no attention to this exchange.

`I don't say you did kill her, Mr Plunkett; I only say you could have. Let's see what we've got here.'

`Well?'

`You were supported off the stage by, Benvolio, who left you in the wings and returned. For the next couple of minutes, including the critical time when the crossbow was fired, nobody can speak for you at all. The Capulets were using the other side of the stage for entrances and exits; even the procession headed by Prince Escalus came in at the other side.

`Don't you see how this might look to a jury? You could have fired that crossbow from the wings, which would make the angle right. And you're a good shot, I hear. You could have slipped out through the pass door to the auditorium, and dropped the bow on the floor to mislead us, and got back under cover of darkness.'

`Maybe I could have, but I didn't!'

`What did you do?'

`I've already told you!'

`Will you just tell me again?'

`I went to my dressing room over there.' He descended the remaining steps and pointed. `Then I went to the dressing room next door for a word with Anne Winfield. She wasn't there, so I ... But I've already told you once, I say. There you are, and that's enough. To hell with you.'

Lieutenant Spinelli grew very persuasive.

`When you've thought it over, young fellow, I'm sure you'll see the necessity for cooperating in a police investigation. You don't want trouble for yourself, do you? As a foreigner enjoying the hospitality of this country, you surely don't want that? We know you're not trying to be obstructive; we know you're a good Catholic...'

`Who says I'm a Catholic?' yelled Barry Plunkett. `I was born in Dublin; all right; so was Bernard Shaw. But my old man is still the pastor of the Merrion Square Presbyterian Church, and I can lick any Popish bastard in this theatre.'

`Now listen, you blarney-swallowing son-of-a-bitch,' yelled Lieutenant Spinelli. `One more word like that and you may get the chance to try. And I won't pull my badge on you, either.'

`Then what the hell's delaying you?'

Lieutenant Spinelli lowered his head.

`The reason,' he bellowed, `is that I'm trying to conduct a police investigation according to the book, and find the truth without intimidating witnesses or kicking their teeth in to get any testimony at all. The DA's on my back Flo's on my back; now you're on my back. Have a heart, can't you?'

`Well now!' said Barry Plunkett. Deeply he pondered something. 'It's just possible, you know, I may have a' bit of a temper. I was brought up among Catholics, there are one or two in Dublin, as you may have heard. They're an ignorant lot, most of 'em; they go to the Church about things that are no bloody business of the Church. But they're still the best-tempered, best-hearted lot `of people I ever saw in this world, and even my; old man would agree to that.'

`It depends on the viewpoint, I guess,' declared Lieutenant Spinelli. `Now I've seen a good deal of Anglo-Saxon Protestants; worked with 'em ,since I 'was a rookie cop in '46. They're not very bright, in some ways, they, think they can interpret God's will better than He can: But taking 'em all in all they're a pretty good bunch of the stubborn mistaken. I sometimes think I prefer 'em to my own people, and I can lick the son-of-a-bitch who says I don't!"

`Shake hands?' said Barry; Plunkett. `Shake hands!' said Carlo Spinelli.

'Pax vobiscum!' intoned Dr Fell, raising an arm in benediction. `This is something for you to watch, Mrs Knox. However, now that amity has been restored and the bastards and sons-of-bitches assigned each to his rightful camp, may we return to the subject of the inquiry?'

`That's what I'm trying to do, Maestro, if this kook of an Irishman will just quit being obstructive!'

`Who's being obstructive, Benvenuto Cellini? Kill Margery Vane, would I? It's p-p-preposterous! I never set eyes on the woman until last January. She was giving me every thing I wanted; why should I kill her? I'm a good shot with a crossbow; I can hit a black beetle on that wall. But, even if I were scatty enough to use a bow that couldn't be depended on - which I'm not - how did I get her to turn her back and await my fire?'

'You may have a point there, at that. But would you mind going on with what you refused to tell me? About your movements?'

'Oh, my movements ! "Let the robber retreat, let the tiger turn tail; in the name of the Empress, the Overland Mail." Well! I went to see Anne, and couldn't find her. How was I to know that even in the middle of a dress she'd be locked in another room upstairs, assuming her usual horizontal position for that louse Delevan?'

`It's a lie!' breathed- a voice Knox remembered well. `It's a wicked lie, and you know it is!'

Down the stairs, still in Juliet's virginal white, but silver hairnet gone. and dark tear-smudges on her cheeks, floated a small, curvaceous, spiritual-looking girl with a timid manner. It is a tribute to Anne Winfield that even tear-smudges and reddened eyelids did not mar her beauty.

`Why are you so mean to me? You can be nice to other people; why are you so mean to me? I never cared for anybody but you, and you know it. I never did any of those awful things; at least, until-' She stopped. `Don't you care for me one little bit?'

`The fact is, my poppet, that I love you to, distraction. But how often have I been encouraged to mention this, with you snatching the britches off every, male between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five?'

Clearly Anne Winfield was too carried away or too blind with tears even to remark the presence of other people.

`It's not true,' she cried to nobody in particular, `and why is everybody so mean to me? Poor Miss Vane! She was the god of my idolatry, as Juliet says about Romeo. I've heard about her, and read about her, and tried to model myself after her, ever since I started to grow up. When she carne in, here tonight at eight o'clock, and talked to us all in the green room, it was the first time I ever saw her. But you'd have thought, from the way she went on, I'd done her some personal injury. Why? Why me? I wanted to drop through the floor; I was afraid I'd blow every line. And if you're going to hate and curse me, Barry, you of all people, it's just no good. I'd better forget trying to act and take up a career as a call girl.'

Barry Plunkett lifted his hand.

`Go to your dressing room, poppet,' he snapped, `and stop this bloody nonsense. You have the soul of a call girl, no doubt. God knows you have all the other equipment. But I don't honestly advise the career. The one thing to be said in your favour is that so far you've never done it for money.'

Miss Winfield opened her eyes. More tears spilled over. But for the first time she really saw Lieutenant Spinelli - and others. She did not pause even to scream. She darted across to a closed door with a card bearing her name; she darted inside, slammed the door, and locked it. In a rush of sympathy Judy had made an instinctive movement to follow her, and then stopped.

`Well,' said Lieutenant Spinelli, putting away his notebook, `that disposes of one witness, anyhow. We can excuse you for tonight, Mr Plunkett. And we've got to excuse you, Mrs Knox. It's time for a talk with that crook locked up in the cellar.'

'Locked up in the cellar?' asked Barry Plunkett. 'In the little storeroom beside the panel with the buttons controlling the trap doors? Tallish bloke in Ivy clothes and a crew cut? He may be a crook, though I didn't think he was. And I'm afraid, old boy, you won't be talking to that one tonight.'

`I won't, eh? Why won't I?'

`Because he's not locked up in the cellar. I let him out.'

`You can't have let him out! I've got the key right here!'

`Easy, old boy. Don't underestimate my talents for picking locks with a bent nail. He was raising hell, kicking the door and what not. Besides, he told a perfectly straight story. If nobody locked him up as a not-very-funny joke, why should he have been locked up? So I let him out, and he hared off.'

`Holy suffering ...!' Lieutenant Spinelli gave it up. `When did this happen?'

`An hour ago, maybe more.'

`And where's the nearest telephone?'

`Box office, I expect. Are you-?'

`Yes, I am. Now wait here! Wait right here, all of you! I'll be back in two minutes!'

A stir ran through the group. Dr Fell was still muttering down his nose. As a matter of fact, a simmering Lieutenant Spinelli returned in little more than the two minutes promised.

`He'll have had time to pick up his duds from the Pershing Hotel. But he won't get much farther than that. This is an all-points alert. Airports, railroad stations, bus terminals: every one will be watched. Also, if the State Highway Patrol's as good as I think it is. ..'

`Look here, Lieutenant,' said Barry Plunkett, `I'm honestly sorry if I've thrown a spanner into the works. But he looked all right to me, and I'm still not persuaded you've got hold of a wrong 'un. His name is Lawrence Porter IV ...'

`I know what his name is, thanks!'

`Comes of an old Southern family - place called Fer-de-Lance, Kentucky, near Louisville - though he was brought up by his mother in the North. He didn't stress the family too much, or I might have been suspicious. His great-grandfather, the first Lawrence Porter, was a delegate to the first Confederate Congress, and commanded a famous Kentucky, cavalry regiment popularly known as Porter's Centaurs, Confederate States of America. Does that help convince you?'

`Yes, you bet it does. It convinces me Lawrence -Porter IV - or the fifth, or the sixth, or what-have-you - is an even bigger liar than I thought he was.'

`Lieutenant Spinelli,' Dr Fell asked gravely, `are you sure ?'

`Yes, of course I'm sure! Kentucky's a border state like Maryland; it no more seceded from the Union than Maryland did. Confederate States of America, for God's sake!'

`Then will you harrumph - will you be kind enough to answer me a question? How many states seceded from the Union to form the Southern Confederacy? You shake your head, I see. Can you answer the question, my dear Knox? How many states seceded from the Union to form the Southern Confederacy?'

`Eleven!' Knox answered promptly. `South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, : Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, Tennessee: that's eleven. And if Judy makes one crack about Stonewall Jackson there's going to be trouble.'

`Come! Why should Mrs Knox refer to Stonewall Jackson ?'

`Never mind; it's an obsession of hers.'

`It's an obsession of yours, you mean!' cried Judy. 'Dr Fell, this

wretch thinks ..."

`I have one more question for the wretch, if he will indulge me. How many stars were there in the Confederate flag ?'

This time Knox had to grope., He closed his eyes, picturing the crossed blue bars with white stars against a red background.

`Thirteen, I think,' he replied, `though I shouldn't care to bet on it. Thirteen!'

`Correct. There were thirteen stars, though only eleven states seceded. How do you account for that?' `I can't say; I don't know.'

`Well, I know,' Lieutenant Spinelli, announced with decision, `I'm not going to stand here all night arguing about the Confederate States of America or Stonewall Jackson either. But I'd give a year's pay, I'd give almost anything, to have some idea of how this crime was committed! Have you an idea, Dr Fell?'

`I. rather think,' Dr Fell' said modestly, `I am beginning to have more than a glimmering.'

'All right! Knowing your habits, Maestro, I won't start hammering at you until you're ready to give. But what we've got is sheer lunacy! Why was the crime committed in this particular way?'

`Because, granting this particular criminal;' answered Dr Fell, `it was the only way in which this, particular crime could have been committed at all.'

12

FIRST NIGHT

ANOTHER DAY and evening had rolled into eternity.

On the night of Monday, April 19th, the moon rose over Richbell in a serene sky. Richbell itself was perhaps less serene. The 9.25 train from Grand Central arrived there at a quarter past ten. Philip and Judy Knox, were the only passengers to alight on the overhead platform.

`Somebody was 'telling me,' Judy said in an awed tone, `there hasn't been such a journalistic sensation since the murder of Dot King in the nineteen-twenties. Who was Dot King?'

`I'm a little cloudy about the details. But it's to be hoped Margery Vane's ghost can't hear us. She wouldn't have cared to be listed even among the better-class prostitutes.'

`Wasn't there a prostitute called Lizzie Borden?

`No, that was a different kind of case. The question, debated to this day,' continued Knox; as they descended through the station and out, `is whether she did or didn't take the axe. But never mind that. There ought to be at least one taxi here.

At the curb waited a handsome buff and cream Pontiac inscribed Summit Cabs.

`Like the one,' murmured Judy, `we rode back to New York in last night. Fancy paying all that money!'

A stout, elderly driver, coatless in the warm spring night, put his head out of the taxi and addressed Knox.

`Which direction you going?'

`Judge Cunningham's house, Broadlawns, on Lone Tree Road. Know the place?'

'Near the amusement park, ain't it?'

`I used to live hereabouts, but I'm none too certain how the land lies. Is there an amusement park?'

`Sure; called Dreamland. Been closed for the winter; opens tomorrow, one day ahead of the World's Fair. Don't want to go there, do you?'

`No; make it Judge Cunningham's. On the way, though, you might stop for a moment at the Mask Theatre.'

`Mask Theatre!' said the driver, as they piled into the back. 'Big doings, eh? Big deal!'

`Did anybody at all turn up for the show tonight?'

`Did "anybody" turn up? Holy cow! Never saw such a mob in this town since General Eisenhower went through in '52. In soup-and-fish too, a lot of 'em. Reporters, flashbulbs like the premeer of a big movie.'

This became manifest a minute later. Above Richbell Avenue, black letters on a glowing background, the legend stared out.

MARGERY VANE PLAYERS present Barry Plunkett Anne Winfield in ROMEO AND JULIET

with Kate Hamilton

Waste paper littered the sidewalk under the marquee and the vestibule beyond. While Judy went on some errand into the drugstore next door, Knox crossed the vestibule. Photographs of Anne Winfield, of Barry Plunkett and Kate Hamilton now adorned it. Connie Lafarge, looking flushed and handsome in a black evening gown with sequins, was waiting for him in the softly illuminated foyer.

`I got your phone message, Phil. Did Judge Cunningham invite you and Judy to dinner?'

`Yes. He felt he couldn't face watching the performance, and Judy and I felt much the same. He also invited Dr Fell and Mr Gulick, but Mr Gulick couldn't snake it. I'm afraid we couldn't make it either; there was a last-minute business crisis at Judy's office. But the judge insisted we should come on anyway.'

`You mean you haven't had anything to eat?'

`We had an oyster stew at Grand Central; we're fine. And things here are shaping up well, apparently?'

`Phil, it's going to be a success; it's going to be a big success, in spite of all those reporters about the murder. For the first time in months Jud is almost happy. You mustn't think he's a chronic grouch, poor dear, it's just that he's had so much on his mind, and expects disaster no matter what happens. But. ...'

`Yes; Connie?'

`The curtain was up at eight-thirty sharp. The first act went with a bang; they're well into the second. The Winfield girl is better than anybody could have hoped, and Barry Plunkett as Romeo-'

`Barry Plunkett as what?'

`Yes; hadn't you heard? He switched parts at the last minute because Anne wanted him to. His language is dreadful; he's dreadful; but you'd never know what he thinks of Romeo from the way he plays it.'

`It's a little rough on young Ferrara, isn't it?'

`Oh, these, young people know each other's parts so well they can switch to anything' at a moment's notice. Tony doesn't mind. Besides, he'll get his chance as Dick Dudgeon in the next play. They'll be doing The Devil's Disciple, and The Circle, and everything the original company failed with.'

`No untoward incidents, then?'

`None at all. The orchestra leader fainted ten minutes before the overture, but Barry threw a bucket of water over him and he's fine too. Oh there is one thing...'

'Yes?'

`Well!' Connie swelled out her bust and lifted a beaming hand. `If things go as splendidly as they anticipate - the dramatic critics are here too, you know - Barry Plunkett's giving a party at the Lone Tree Tavern. You and Judy can be there, can't you?'

`We should be honoured, Connie.'

`I'm sure I hope it'll be all right. It's Jud who worries me; he's too happy; I don't like it. And Sam Jenkins, the Mayor of Richbell, is here with a couple of cronies from Harvard, and ... you can never tell about these parties, can you?'

`Connie, what actually is troubling you so much?'

`Just a little thing, really! Last night, when Judy said you and she had been married nearly twenty-seven years, I didn't know you'd been parted for almost twenty. If I said anything I shouldn't I'm most awfully sorry; and - couldn't you two get together again?'

`I don't know. I'm working, on it. Goodbye for the moment, Connie; we'll probably meet later.'

Through the open doors to the vestibule he saw Judy emerge from the drugstore, putting something into her handbag. He joined her on the pavement; the cab door slammed; they bowed; east along Richbell Avenue.

Poised and aloof against the right-hand side of the taxi, particularly devastating to his sensibilities in a brown silk dress, Judy listened with a judicial air to his report.

`There's no doubt at all;' she decided, `that the exquisitely humorous

Mr Plunkett lives up to his reputation as an actor. But as anything else? The sheer inflated ego of the man, hogging all the best parts in spite of what anybody says!

`Well, he's the star. And it was Anne Winfield who begged him to play Romeo.'

`Yes, that's what I meant. The things he says about that poor Winfield woman: how she puts up with 'him I can't think. He's like you; he talks like you; he's almost as bad as you. The slander you've uttered-!'

`Light of my life; draw it mild. From actual evidence in my possession, I never knew you to tear the britches off anybody except me.'

`How vulgar! How sickeningly vulgar!'

`If I tell you to come off it again,, will you slap my face for the second time?'

`Yes, I will! And don't think you can goose me, either; you'd like to goose me, I know, but you won't get the chance!'

`There shall be no goosing, on my word of honour. Let's - drop the subject. Will you have a cigarette?'

`No, I will not. You know I don't smoke!'

`I know you do smoke. You're not heavily addicted; but last night you had a ,cigarette in the train coming out here with Judge Cunningham. We're on our way to Judge Cunningham's now. If he should mention the dread subject ...'

`I don't understand what you're talking about!'

`At two-thirty this morning, when Dr Fell was being assisted into a police: car for White Plains, and you and I were getting into a taxi to take you home to East 36th Street, I casually offered you a cigarette then. And I might have been offering you-hashish or opium. Are you on an anti-tobacco kick, Judy? Has somebody been reading you grisly pamphlets about lung cancer?'

`I won't stand this badgering, Phil Knox! I won't endure it a minute longer!'

`Very well; consider the words unsaid. The next intersection should be Lone Tree Road, bearing northeast towards the judge's.'

The judge's house, once Adam Cayley's, was a square mansion of dark red brick with grey pillars in front, on a slight rise overlooking the broad lawns which gave the house its name. The moon silvered its windows. A discreet elderly maid admitted them through a hall of polished hardwood and stands of armour to the great oak-panelled library, with shelves of books to the ceiling and long windows facing in the direction of the amusement park called Dreamland.

Judge Cunningham, immaculate, and Dr Fell, far from immaculate in an old alpaca suit dusted with cigar ash, occupied deep chairs beside floor lamps. Judge Cunningham rose as the visitors entered.

`Come in!' he said. `Come in, please, and help further to brighten the life of an old bachelor with too much time on his hands. I have been showing Dr Fell,' he touched a book on the little table, `I have been showing Dr Fell my authentic second quarto, 1599,' which contains something as close as we are ever likely to get to the original text of Romeo and Juliet. But I confess we have both been impatient to tell our news.'

`News, sir?'

`Yes, Philip. I had better explain that Lieutenant Spinelli has seen fit to confide in me. Particularly as regards young Lawrence Porter,, about whom I had known nothing.'

Dr Fell, who seemed to be communing with a very dyspeptic bust of Thomas Carlyle, did not get up. He merely waved a dead cigar in greeting.

`And I should explain,' he chuckled, `that I have already apologized for presuming to instruct certain persons in American history. But surely it is natural that I, a foreigner and a stranger, should take more interest in your history than you yourselves are often inclined to show? I am acquainted with Americans, including one named Knox, who can correct me sharply on points of English history which I thought I knew and had never learned. They were too close to be seen.'

`All right!' agreed Knox, seeing Judy to a chair and sitting on the arm of it. `But can't we clear up this matter of the number of stars in the Confederate flag? If only eleven states seceded, why were there thirteen stars?'

`In a moment, in a moment!' Judge Cunningham spoke rather pettishly. `This precipitousness, my boy, will gain you nothing. Concerning Lawrence Porter. ..'

`Have they got Porter, by the way?'

`Oh, yes. He was nabbed this morning at Kennedy Airport, awaiting a flight to Louisville.'

`Is he in jail?'

`Hardly. This alleged Lawrence Porter IV-' `Who is he?'

`That is the surprise,' said judge Cunningham. `He really is Lawrence Porter IV. He is everything he claimed to be, and much more he could have claimed but didn't. You were all under the impression, including Dr. Fell himself, that the boy was being supported by the late Margery Vane?'

`Yes, we certainly thought so.'

`Nothing could be further from the facts. These were established when his father, who appears to own about half the state of Kentucky, telephoned Lieutenant Spinelli from a town named Fer-de-Lance. Lawrence is only twenty-seven, a mere infant. Years ago his mother, quarrelling with the father - if a bachelor may preach on marriage, why will they split up families? -- took him to 'Philadelphia. Each month, since the death of his mother: six years ago, he has been receiving an allowance so large that it frightens me. Would you care to hear what his father said on the phone?'

`Very much.'

`"Iffen you think that boy stole some jewels," he is quoted

as saying, "you lemme know whut they cost and I'll send you a cheque. But I don't think he did; he's a Potuh; you go to hell for a No'th'n bastud. 'We have had more than, one temper in this affair, though I think we could have dispensed with Mr Plunkett's. Do you understand now, Philip?'

`I think so.'

`Young Lawrence likes travelling; he likes the south of France; he likes playing tennis. Particularly he liked the late Margery Vane, finding her. .. finding her.. .'

'Bedworthy?' If I don't shock Judy by saying it.'

'Your delicacy does you credit, Philip. Yet Miss Vane's career, seems to demonstrate,' said Judge Cunningham, with a slightly raffish look, 'that the words must have been most apt.'

'Yes, but what about the number of stars in the Confederate flag?'

'I was stumped for the answer, let me confess. I must leave this to the esteemed counsel for the defence.'

'Oh, hang' it all!' rumbled a distressed Dr Fell. He wheezed, struggled to sit upright, and waved the cigar. 'The answer is in any encyclopaedia, if you're not too lazy to work an encyclopaedia. During the Civil War there was much sympathy for the South among states which did not actually secede. Two more states, though never seceding ... can you guess. what they were?'

'Kentucky and Maryland?' hazarded Knox.

'Kentucky and Missouri. Two more states, I say, sent delegates to the first Confederate Congress. Thirteen stars crept into the flag and stayed there. The cavalry regiment known as Porter's Centaurs, an unofficial unit commanded by Colonel Lawrence Porter, did actually exist and swore allegiance to the Confederate States of America. Are you satisfied?'

'We must all be satisfied,' said Judge Cunningham, 'with the innocence of the present-day Lawrence Porter. He committed no murder; he stole no jewels; we may forget him. I believe he is at the theatre tonight, as is Lieutenant Spinelli. I myself could not go, as I explained. Perhaps I am unduly fastidious; perhaps I am merely old. And now, good friends, what may be done to amuse you?'

'I might escort you through my hall of weapons, though it is so depleted by Romeo and Juliet that it makes less than a brave show. At least I can show you my books.'

He did so, and he had some beauties. The time ticked on. Their host did more than show books. He pressed brandy and cigars on Dr Bell and Knox, who accepted. (He pressed brandy and cigarettes on Judy, who accepted the brandy but smiled and shook her head at the cigarettes.

Judy seemed in a pleasant, even pliant mood. But Dr Fell contributed little, occasionally muttering something about Hans

Wagner. The clock-had struck eleven-thirty, when their host put down what seemed to be the last book.

It was the true first edition of Alice in Wonderland, 1865, suppressed by its author, who had paid for the production, because he had not liked' the illustrations.

Judge Cunningham faced them with the air of one coming to a decision.'

`There is no reason why the Rev Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, who wrote two children's classics and whose preoccupation with small girls has interested modern psychiatrists, should put into my head the notion which has occurred to me. No jurist - nay, no good citizen - should mention this at all. It comes of mere gossip, idle gossip, vicious gossip; I don't believe it for a moment. But we have on our hands a vicious crime; possible solutions torment me; I yield to this notion. It concerns the Margery Vane of many years ago.'`

`Oh, ah?' said Dr Fell.

`The Margery Vane of 1928, was a young girl. But she was more than merely nubile; she was married. Some months before she had falsely testified to the age of eighteen so that she might marry Adam Cayley. She married him; he died, leaving her a rich woman. No doubt you are aware that, following his death, she returned to her parents and remained virtually secluded until she went abroad three years later?'

`Oh, ah,' said Dr Fell.

`Rumour (Virgil's evil rumour; where did it start?) has whispered that Margery Vane, even when she married Adam Cayley, already had a lover. Who was the man? Nobody knows, or even that he existed at all. Rumour further whispers that she went into seclusion not to await her twenty-first

birthday and full rights over her inheritance, but to bear the lover's child and arrange for its upbringing. Have we seen anyone hereabouts who reminds us enough of Margery Vane to be her daughter?'

`Do you mean Anne Winfield?' cried Judy.

`Yes, Mrs Knox, I mean Anne Winfield.'

`Just a minute, Judge!' protested Knox. `This is a fancy story, but it

won't do. A child born in 1928 would now be thirty-seven years old. And that young girl who plays Juliet !'

'Were you deceived by her appearance, Philip, as so many have been deceived? I myself might have been deceived if I had not known. Anne Winfield is thirty-seven, the same age as Barry Plunkett. And I know this because I am acquainted with her parents in Springfield, Massachusetts. You are quite right,; Philip, the story won't do: Margery Vane, in those days at least, was too cautious and canny to have risked an extra-marital affair. Her whole career attests this. But, it gives one furiously to think, don't you agree?'

'Oh, ah!' said Dr Fell.

'Having told you what I do not believe,' Judge Cunningham said smoothly, 'may I ask you all to accompany me now?'

Straight-backed, courtly, he led them out into the hall and to a spacious, dark-panelled billiard room,, where a canopy of lights burned above the green baize table.

'It is called a billiard room,' he explained,, 'because it contains, as usual, a pool table. I have led you here, Judy and Philip,, because I am about to do an inhospitable, even unpardonable thing.' He opened one of the French windows to the rear lawn. 'I have certain, theories concerning the murder I would try on Dr Fell before uttering them in public. With his permission, I propose to lead him into the garden and expound. Yet surely,; Judy and Philip, this should be no great hardship. If ever I saw a couple devoted to each other, you two can qualify. Have you instructed her, my boy, in the principles of American pool? Please try; I shall not be long. Dr Fell?'

'With pleasure,' bumbled the doctor.

He negotiated the open window by turning himself sideways. Judge Cunningham followed; they could see the judge's spare figure move forward under the moon. Suddenly Dr Fell thrust his head back in

'Hans Wagner,' he said. 'Oh, ah!' Then he closed the window and disappeared.

The numbered, brightly coloured pool balls were racked in their wooden triangle at one end of the table. Knox removed the triangle, took down two cues from a rack, chalked both, handed one to Judy, and studied the position from the other end of the table.

`Care to try this?' he suggested. 'I'll break, though I'm badly out of practice. Watch!'

There was a sharp crack; the balls shivered and rolled wide.

`Go ahead, Judy! It's something like snooker, only easier, You just call your shots on anything you like. "Six ball in the end pocket, seven ball in the side pocket..."

'I know how it's done; I've played in San Francisco.'

Dreamy-eyed, pliant-seeming, she bent above the table with the cue balanced. The light gleamed on her hair and lips.

`Ten ball in the end pocket'" called Judy, neatly clicking the three ball into the side pocket as the white one sped past. Then she put down her cue.

`Did you hear Dr Fell, Phil? - He's got as much of a thing about Hans Wagner as you had about Stonewall Jackson. Who was Hans Wagner, anyway?'

`A classic baseball hero in the days before the introduction of the jackrabbit ball, when every pitch near the plate was not necessarily belted out of the park by the present generation of long ball hitters.'

`Oh, baseball! Such a slow game, isn't it?'

`A lover of cricket calls baseball slow?'

`Cricket's meant to be like that. Baseball isn't supposed to be, but it always is. The pitcher messes about for ages before he'll throw; they all mess about. Tell me more of Hans Wagner, please. What did he do?'

`In his (athletic) old age, Judy, Hans or Honus Wagner still played short for the Pittsburgh Pirates.'

`Short what?' demanded Judy, as though engaged in a game of 'Knock, Knock, Who's There?'

`Shortstop. It's an infield position between second and third, but for God's sake don't ask second and third what! As a small boy I can just remember seeing him, looking squat and rather bow-legged, when the Pirates played the Giants at the Polo Grounds. In his best days he was very fast, a great base-stealer.'

`You Americans can't even be honest about the bases, can you?'

`Light of my life, shut up. That remark is not even worthy of notice. Judy. `Yes?'

`Have; you given any thought to what Judge' Cunningham said?'

'No; what did he say?',

`He's a wise old bird, the judge. "If ever I saw a couple devoted to each other." You know, Judy...'

`Go away from me! You're an unspeakable beast and I can't bear the sight of you!'

'Was ever woman in this humour wooed? Was ever woman in this humour won?'

`What part of Romeo and Juliet is that from?'

`It's not from Romeo and Juliet at all. It's from Richard III '

'Phil, you disappoint me; you really disappoint me. Since we can't seem to get away from the Civil War, don't you know any more poetry about Stonewall Jackson? Or the other general who was an alcoholic like you?'

`General Sheridan, madam, was not an alcoholic. The aspersion on me is plain nonsense.'

`What do you call your behaviour, then, when we were living together in the old days? Always getting drunk and goosing me, as you're still doing to this very day!'

`Do you claim I was drunk when I goosed you outside the jeweller's window?'

`The tone of this conversation,' Judy breathed to the ceiling, `grows elevating beyond all belief. It should be tape-recorded and put into a book for marriage counsellors everywhere. You're just simply impossible: that's all there is to it! If you must have somebody to goose on one side and assault on the other, you'd better hire yourself a

`Telephone, sir!' interrupted the elderly maid, who had hurried in with the pacifying air of an official at the United Nations. `In the hall! Telephone!'

`Judge Cunningham's in the garden. I'll go and get him.' 'But it's not for the judge, sir; it's for you! It's Mrs Lafarge; she sounds excited, and she says it's very important.' -

13

PARTY MASK

IN THE hall, under a full-length portrait of Adam Cayley as Hamlet, Knox snatched up the phone.

`Connie? Is that you, Connie? Don't tell me some other damn thing has happened at that theatre!'

`No, no, it's nothing like that. Can you hear me?' `All too well; you needn't shout.'

`It's nothing like that, I said. The curtain was down half; an hour ago; Phil, you never heard such an ovation. I stopped counting the number of curtain calls; Anne Winfield was practically smothered in flowers.'

`Where are you now, Connie?'

`At the Lone Tree Tavern. And I have to shout; can't you hear the noise in the background?'

`Are the actors whooping it up, or what?'

`The actors aren't even here yet; they're still being congratulated in their dressing rooms. No, no! It's Jud and some friends of ours: from Richbell, from Mamaroneck, from Farleigh, from all over the place!'

`What are they doing, then?'

`Nothing much, yet. In another minute they'll begin singing college songs against each other. There's no harm in that, though it is a little silly of middle-aged men and elderly men too. What I'm afraid of is that they'll go on from the college songs to something else. Phil,' begged Connie, `can

you come over here right away? Bring Judy, of course, but be sure to bring Judge Cunningham and Dr Fell. Judge Cunningham's authority can quiet them; it can sort, of shame them, if they start singing things I don't even like to think about. Will you do that, Phil?'

`I'll try, anyway.'

He, put down the phone and turned. In the middle of the hall stood Judy, with Judge Cunningham and Dr Fell towering behind her.

`Connie Lafarge,' observed the judge, `has a very penetrating voice. But there is much sense in what she says. I have no objection to a modest party, or indeed to participating in it,' and he rubbed his hands together, `provided always it shall remain within bounds. You concur, Dr Fell?'

`I do After last night's disturbing events, and the equally disturbing theories you have, expounded to me,' said Dr Fell, `some loosening, and unbuckling may be good for the soul. Harrumph.'

`How do you feel, Judy?' asked Knox.

'We-ell .. - said Judy. She may have hated the sight of him. But she took his arm and stood close just the same.

`Carpe diem' intoned Dr Fell, with a return of his ecclesiastical manner.

`-quam minimum credula postero,' finished judge Cunningham. `My hat is in the closet here, together with your own hat and stick and cloak,. Will you follow me, please?'

Their host's venerable Chrysler stood in the drive at the side of the house. Judge Cunningham drove fast and rather erratically along Lone Tree Road, with Judy and Knox crowded' into the front seat beside him, and Dr Fell occupying much of the back.

`Are you familiar, sir,' asked the judge, craning round, `with our American college songs?'

`With some of them alas

'Alas?'

`On one occasion, I fear, it led to my downfall.'

`How so?'

`The incident,' replied Dr Fell, `occurred some years ago at a fashionable Eastern preparatory school, what we call a public school. I was lecturing in the auditorium of the Memorial Hall, a fine room with a pipe organ and paintings of scenes from American history by an artist named Wyeth. For, three-quarters of an hour I entertained

the lads, or tried to, with what anecdotes I could think of. As a sort of response, while somebody played the pipe organ, I was treated to an enthusiastic impromptu concert, by boys and masters alike, of those college songs you mention. One particular favourite had a burden to the effect that Lord Jeffrey Amherst was a soldier of the king, and he sailed from across the sea-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee ...'

`Yes, yes; we are familiar with it!'

`To the Frenchmen and the In-di-ans (three syllables) he didn't do a thing, in the wilds of this wild count-ree, and so on in a manner as spirited and rousing as it was titularly and historically inexact. The trouble started in the Masters' Club afterwards. When I pointed out mildly that the general in question was recalled to England because, of his inability to defeat the Indians, and that under no circumstances would the first Baron Amherst have been called Lord Jeffrey Amherst, then the cataract came down at Lodore. Scorn, ridicule were poured upon me both for aspersing the gentleman's memory and for being too stuffy about titles. However! From the head of the English Department I did learn certain other songs not generally sung in public.'

`Let us hope,' said Judge Cunningham, `you will have no opportunity to hear them tonight. There! That sounds decorous enough, we must admit?'

The shop-fronts of Richbell Avenue sped past. With something of a flourish Judge Cunningham drew up outside the Lone Tree Tavern.

There was certainly a good deal of noise, through open windows with screens fixed in place. But its dominant note, voices raised in song to the accompaniment of a piano, had a kind of hymnlike fervency. In Dr Fell's style of quotation, the voices sang that the stars brightly glancing beheld them advancing, and kindly smiled upon them from on high; but o fortunati, o terque beati, who heard the mystic call of Beta Psi.

The noise blattered at Knox as, leading the way with Judy, he entered the front door. On the right of a central corridor, two dining rooms stretched to the back. On the left stretched two bars. Each of the drinking rooms contained a piano and a long bar counter. Well appointed in mahogany, dimly lighted, redolent of damp and whisky, each was occupied by an assembly of men with a fair leavening of women: All were well dressed) all seemed pre-occupied.

Knox saw Connie Lafarge, who, dodged along beside him like a

runner carrying the ball in a broken field. But he saw no other familiar face as he hustled Judy through from the front bar to the back. Elbowing his way to the counter, securing a Scotch and soda. for Judy, a brandy for judge Cunningham, and beer for Dr Fell and, himself, he carried these on a tray to the table now occupied by Judy, the judge, and Dr Fell.'

`What can I get you, Connie?'

`Nothing, thanks; I've had mine. Do you see what's happening now?'

He saw. A group of earnest gentlemen, of at least mature years and a trifle paunchy, had gathered at the piano in the back bar. Their leader Connie said he was another lawyer, but the name failed to register sat down on the bench and spread his hands across the keys. The others bent their heads towards him, a light of sentiment in their eyes. Both rooms fell silent as the voices soared up, though a stir from the front bar gave indications of a group hastily gathering at the other piano. Rapt, carried away, the singers in the back bar expressed their devotion.

`Although Yale has al-ways fa-voured the

vi-o-let's dark blue,

And the ma-ny sons of Har-var'd to the

crimson rose are true,

We will own the li-ly slen-der, nor hon-our

shall it lack,

While the ti-ger stands de-fen-der of the

or-ange and the black.

We will own the LI-LY SLEND-DER...'

It was a change of beat on the last line, but they had no opportunity to finish. As though somebody had fired a pistol,

the other room woke up. Piano keys crashed; the short syllables smote like hammers.

`Bulldog, bulldog, bow, wow, wow,

E-li Yale!

Bulldog, bulldog, bow, wow, wow, our
team can

Nev-er fail!

When the sons of-E-li breakthrough the
line, that is the

Sign we hail,

Bulldog, bulldog, bow, wow, wow

E-li Yale!

`Excellent!' commented Dr Fell, through, the applause and uproar which followed. He swallowed beer. `I well remember that one, which may reasonably be described as spirited. Your health, gentlemen!'

Judge Cunningham,' cried Connie, `aren't you going to interfere?'

'Interfere, madam?'

`Yes! It's no use appealing to Jud; he's singing with the Yale crowd and leading them.'

`But why should I interfere? In some ways, of course, you are quite right. I am a Cornell man myself; the spectacle of sober citizens behaving like teenagers is one to wake grave doubts. Yet they have offended in no way.'

`But, Judge Cunningham, what will it be next?'

`Frankly, madam, I have begun to wonder. Are you listening, Dr Fell?'

`I am agog.'

`Look through into the next room. The man carrying the piano accordion is Sam Jenkins, our esteemed mayor.' `The pop-eyed gentleman: with the [accordion. is](#)

the Mayor of Richbell?'

`He is indeed. I know his alma mater, and that of the crony beside him. If I were a betting man, which I am not, I should give odds that

the next chorus with which we are favoured will be "Harvard Was Old Harvard When the Bulldog Was a Pup".'

Dr Fell exhibited, signs of alarm.

'I am also familiar with that one,' he said, 'and it lacks a certain gracious New England hospitality. Aren't we all likely to be chucked from here? Or even land in what is vulgarly known as the pokey?'

'Not unless Yale challenges Harvard or vice versa. I have already informed you, Philip, that the Richbell police are an almost too accommodating lot. At the same time, I could wish Lieutenant Spinelli were here to lend his restraining influence.'

'He's at the theatre now; he said he was going to stay there!' cried Connie. 'Phil, you'll go, and get Lieutenant Spinelli, won't you?'

'Listen, Connie. You're not to bring the cops in for a thing like this? You don't want Jud in the pokey, do you?'

'I don't want anybody in the pokey!' Connie was near tears. 'And they'd hardly arrest the major, would they? I just want them to behave themselves. If Lieutenant Spinelli's here he can sort of keep an eye on things, that's all. Please, _ Phil! If you won't do a little thing like this for somebody who was once very fond of you and still is ... !'

'Do you want Spinelli here as much as that, Connie?'

'Please, please, please!'

'My presence, I feel sure,' Judge Cunningham said virtuously, 'is sufficient guarantee against untoward incident. The real trouble with these fellows is that they can't sing; they don't know how to use their voices. Still! If it will make Mrs Lafarge feel happier, Philip, perhaps you had better go.'

'All right, then." Knox looked at Judy, who was sipping Scotch and soda. 'What's your view, Sweetheart of 'Sigma Chi?'

'It's, very w-wrong and wicked of me, I know; it comes of associating with you and being c - corrupted as you've corrupted me.- But I love it, I honestly love it! I almost wish something dreadful would happen.'

'Yes, I thought you might. You're a faker, you know.'

'What do you mean by that?'

`Just what I say; but there isn't time to explain now. Stand aside, will you? I've got to get the gendarmerie.'

`Phil, what's this song they're going to sing?'

`You'll hear in a moment. Watch the man with the accordion.'

He strode through the other room, and into the corridor to the front door. The accordion emitted an experimental bleat. A respectful silence fell as two hearty voices, upraised in a passion of intensity, rang through front bar and back.

`Oh, Harvard was old Harvard when the

bulldog was a pup,

And Harvard will be Harvard when the

bulldog's days are up

The rest of it pursued him the short distance between tavern and theatre. At the end of it he heard a yell. Being (he thought) past the time of life when such japes amused him, Knox quickened his step.

The vestibule of the theatre was dark. The foyer swam in the same semi-darkness of the night before. He was well across the foyer, wondering where to find Lieutenant Spinelli, when a new thought occurred to him.

They might say what they liked about his countrymen at play, but that situation at the Lone Tree Tavern contained some of the possibilities of a riot.' Judy couldn't be in any actual danger, could-she?

Probably not, but it mustn't be, risked. He had turned to go back in a hurry when something like a riot seemed to break out in the theatre itself.

At the top of the right-hand stairs to the dress circle, a line of light shot out as the door "to the office was knocked open. The door slammed shut. Several voices blared behind that door.

'Grab him!'

`He's grabbed; he won't try it again!'

`Better slap him down good-and proper, hadn't you?'

`How many times do you want hint slapped down? There's no fight left in him; he's- just a little slippery, unless we watch it. Listen, Lieutenant, what do you want us to do with this kook?'

Knox took three steps up the stairs.

`Lieutenant Spinelli!' he shouted. `Lieutenant Spinelli!'

There was a slight pause. Then the office door opened. In the aperture appeared the amiable Borgia face of the lieutenant, now far from amiable.

`Yes?'

Knox took six more steps up so that the light would reveal him.

`Lieutenant Spinelli, can you come down here for a minute?'

`Yes, I can come down there for a minute. All right; sayit!'

`Say what?'

`Say what you came to say. I goofed about preventing the murder, and then I goofed about Larry Porter. Everybody else is saying it; why don't you say it too?'

`But I didn't come here about that!'

`Well, what did you come here about? You and Dr Fell are at Judge Cunningham's, aren't you?'

`We were at Judge Cunningham's. We're all at the LoneTree Tavern now. They're singing college songs and what not. The judge thinks you ought to come along and keep an eye on things in case they get rowdy.'

`Things are rowdy enough ;already, thanks. Right with you!' Lieutenant Spinelli closed the door behind him and walked downstairs with Knox.

`If Dr Fell's in that bar,' he, `I want to see him in a hurry. I didn't goof about the customer we've got now!'

`Customer?'

`We've got Weary Willie. He was in the theatre last night, or says he was. Unless-it's the alcohol talking, he tells the damndest story we've

heard yet.'

`Let's go, shall we?'

`In a minute, in a minute! First I'd better go back and speak to somebody in the dressing rooms. Wait here, will you?'

`Lieutenant, have you got to go to the dressing rooms? Anyway, the people of the company were supposed to have been at the tavern. If they want a drink-'

`If they want a drink, eh? They've got plenty to drink where they are. Practically everybody sent out for a bottle from the liquor store. Yes, I've got to go back-stage; I'm on duty, whether or not anybody else is. You kite along back to the bar; I can join you almost immediately.'

`Yes, I think I'll do; just-that. Judy's there; frankly, I'm a little apprehensive.'

He need not have worried. When, again he reached the door of the Lone Tree Tavern, his watch told him he had been gone only five minutes.

Front and back bar were now less than half full; nobody was at either piano. Yet he had a general 'impression that some sort of crisis had already occurred, and that a certain serenity now ruled the atmosphere of whisky, and damp.

But emotion remained too. His own, group, except Judge Cunningham, still gathered at the table in the back bar. First he thought Judy must be in pain. She was standing beside the table, Scotch and soda finished, arms locked across her stomach, rocking slowly, forward and back. Then he saw_ it was an intense effort to avoid exploding with mirth. The expression on her face was reflected in several faces roundabout, including Dr Fell's.

`What's the matter, Judy?'

'I'm all ri! I'm all ri!.I'm all ri!'

'Honestly, my dear, it can't be as funny as all that! I haven't seen-you in such hysterics since the night of the BBC's concert for the Royal Navy at the Albert Hall in '44, when Sylvia Oddie's pants fell down as she was standing at the microphone singing `,'Oh, Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms

`I did not l-laugh when Sylvia l-lost her pants, poor girl!'

'No, naturally not; you were horror-struck. I merely had to pick you up off the floor in a fit. What's been happening here, Judy? Don't tell me Yale and Harvard really tangled at last?'

.'No, no, n-nothing like that. When you went out, Phil, the Yale crowd had already left the piano. But I don't expect you n-noticed?'

`No; I had other things to think about. However, let me stress an ironclad and inviolable rule of my own day; I don't know whether it still obtains. Years ago no man from Yale would ever say he was at Yale; he said he was at New Haven, which at least was geographically accurate. No man at Harvard would condescend to mention Harvard; he said he was at Cambridge, which has caused confusion among the visiting British. A man from Princeton, of course, was well and truly stymied.'

`What was your university, Phil?'

'Cornell. It's Judge Cunningham's too. Where is he, by the way?'

`That's what I'm trying to tell you, dear, if you wouldn't run on about my friends losing their pants. Phil; isn't there a Quaker college called Haverford?'

Don't you say anything against Haverford!' retorted Knox. `When the Haverford Cricket Eleven toured England in 1904 ,they walloped the tar out of the MCC.'

'What's the MCC?' demanded a bushy-haired, angry-looking little man at an adjacent table. Knox needed no second glance to identify him as Mr Benjamin Meyer, the orchestra-leader of the Mask Theatre. `What's the MCC?'

'Marylebone Cricket Club. Years ago they held the same position in English sport that the Yankees hold in, baseball today.'

`The Yankees won't make it this year; want to bet? With Mantle and Marls practically out of the lineup-!'

`Phil, for heaven's sake! Now you can't go on about anything except baseball. Isn't Haverford a Quaker college?'

`We don't call 'em Quakers, Judy. They're the Society of Friends, and they're very fine people. Anyway, Haverford is non-denominational.'

`But, the heads of the college, the ones who run and operate it: they're Qua - Friends, aren't they?'

`Yes, that's true.'

`Well!' said Judy, regaining something of her dignity. `The two Harvard men,. Mayor Jenkins and his friend, finished singing what they'd do to any Yale so-and-so they found within their walls. The mayor gave a loud yell.'

`I heard it, though I didn't know it was the mayor. I thought-

"Please! Meanwhile, three other men - we didn't know who they were had taken over the piano. They struck up a rowdy but perfectly harmless song, "I'm a Rollicking Lord from Hav-er-ford and a Hell of a Student Prince." I can't think what came over Mayor Jenkins. He draped the accordion over his arm; he put both thumbs in his ears, wiggled his fingers in the air, puffed out his cheeks into a perfectly horrible face, and gave a raspberry you could have heard in the next county.

`The three Quakers didn't say anything to him. They just addressed themselves to the piano as though really getting down to business. The song they sang-'

Here Judy adjusted her own voice to concert-singing pitch.

`By recent discoveries at Harvard, of Darwin and Huxley and Ball. ..'

`Yes, yes, I'm familiar with that strain too!'

`The mayor walked forward and said, `You want trouble, do you?" The leading Quaker just yelled, "Up with George Fox," and batted Mayor. Jenkins over the head with a folding chair and knocked him silly.'

`He batted the Mayor of Richbell with a folding chair?'

'Night-life in Westchester County,' commented Dr Fell. `I expected repercussions. We got them.'

`Indeed: we did, Phil. The mayor's crony, the other Harvard man, picked up a soda water siphon and tried to squirt the leading Quaker in the face.- But he was too tight, I expect;' it went wild and hit the barman. Then the Quakers grabbed him. It wasn't f-fair; they were three to one! Two of them, held his arms while the third stood back

with the siphon and squirted him in the left eye. Then - they picked him up and chucked him out the nearest window. There was no glass in it, fortunately; only the screen.

`By this time the mayor had got up, a little groggily.' He said something; it wasn't very nice. The leading Quaker shouted, "William Penn for President." So they picked up Mayor Jenkins and chucked him headfirst out the door on to the pavement. But a p-police car was p-passing at the time, and...'

`And now the mayor's got all three Quakers in the pokey, I suppose?'

`No, not a bit! The mayor wasn't really as mad as he pretended to be; his friend was too drunk to care. Anyway, Judge Cunningham stepped in then.'

`Judge Cunningham was wonderful!' breathed Connie Lafarge, deeply and powerfully impressed. `Such dignity! He said, "Gentlemen, allow cooler and wiser heads to adjudicate this issue".'

`Yes, but what happened?'

`All eight of them,' explained Judy, `the two Harvardites with the accordion, the three Quakers, the two police officers, Judge Cunningham - oh, I forgot, and Mr Lafarge too-'

`Yes, Jud went: with them!" cried Connie. `Isn't it splendid!'

`They went into the back room of the restaurant on the other side of the-passage. That was just as you came in, Phil. I don't know what they're doing except that Judge Cunningham beckoned a waiter.'

`I know what they're doing,' exclaimed Connie. `He's teaching them their duties as responsible amen.'

`He's teaching them something, anyway, said Judy. 'Listen! Don't you hear an accordion?'

It was unnecessary to call for attention; they all heard it. They heard not only prodigies on an accordion. They heard nine voices raised with solemnity and power. Once more both bars grew silent; once more the premises were flooded in song.

`See them plun-ging down to the goal,

See the rud-dy ban-ners stream

Hear the crash-ing ech-oes roll,

As we cheer for the big red team!

RAH, RAH, RAH,

Cheer till the sound wakes the blue hills around,

Make the scream of the north wind yield

To the strength of the yell of the men of Cor-nell

As the big red team takes the field!

`Phil, where are you going?'

'I'm going in to join the singing; why not?'

`No, dear, please don't. I mean: sing all you like; I'd join in too if I knew the words; but stay here with me!' `Very well; remind me to teach you.'

`Three thou-sand strong we march, march along

From our home on the grey rock height;

Oh, the vict'ry is sealed when our team takes

the field,

And we cheer for the red and white!'

'Is everything all right in here?' demanded Lieutenant Spinelli, striding through to the back bar. `Mr Knox said he was a little apprehensive.'

`Everything, Lieutenant,' Dr Fell assured him, `is fully under control. Merely a 'pleasant' social evening in the Friendly Town of Richbell.'

`Now, really!' fluttered Connie Lafarge. `We, don't want to give poor Judy the wrong impression,, you know!' `The wrong impression?

`That this is a typical evening in Richbell or anywhere else. Aren't you shocked, dear, at the way Americans can carry on?'

'Shocked?' exclaimed Judy. `When I've been in this country nearly twenty years? Besides, with one brother in the RAF and two more in

the Navy, don't you think I've seen things a hundred times worse?'

`But that awful song about the recent discoveries at Harvard ... !'

`Oh, good heavens!' said Judy. `In England they've been singing that song about Oxford for nearly a hundred years.'

`Precisely!' boomed Dr Fell. 'No doubt the slander originated at Cambridge, where Sir Robert Stayell Ball (1840-1913) was professor of astronomy from 1892 until his death.. Though what astronomy has to do with hedgehogs-'

`Hedgehogs?' snapped Lieutenant Spinelli., `If that means what I think it does, there's an NYU song I'd like to give you myself. But we've got damn serious work ahead, Maestro, and I want you and Mr Knox at the theatre as quick as you can possibly get there!'

14

PANIC IN THE GREEN ROOM

No SWORDS, daggers, or crossbows were tonight stacked round the walls of the green room under playbills and photographs. The light of the student's lamp lent the place a kind of dusty homeliness.

`Now listen,' pursued Lieutenant; Spinelli., to whom the situation had been explained; `listen, Maestro, and you too, Mr Knox! No more funny business, you hear? Get off this college song kick;; forget squirting soda siphons and swatting people over the head with chairs. Is that understood?'

`At the same time,' ventured Dr Fell, `Mr Samuel Jenkins must be rather an entertaining sort - of mayor. It would be a pleasure to watch him preside in the police court.'

`That party's still going on, Maestro; they'll be lucky if they don't land in court. But don't you worry, Mr Knox; your wife will be quite safe in Mrs, Lafarge's care. Me,' declared Lieutenant Spinelli, `I've been doing quite a lot of investigating today.'

`Investigating?'

`For one thing, Mr Knox, I've been investigating your wife. Now don't give me such a funny look! I've been investigating everybody.

`And I'll level with you. I'd still like to know what was with her and Lady Severn; I think Lady Severn could have stuck a dagger into her,

and vice versa. But I still think she's in the clear, and that's straight. Since I couldn't get away myself, I sent Jenks, my best man, to talk to her boss in New York.

`Now, the magazine people give her the highest testimonials. She went to work for 'em as a stenographer on April 12th, 1946, and made her own way up; she's one of the editors now. She's intelligent; a good worker, and full of bright ideas-'

`I could have told you that.'

`-though she's inclined to be sassy and talk back to the boss.'

`I could have told you that too.'

'Anyway, there you are," said Lieutenant Spinelli. `I couldn't have asked for a better report on my own sister. As for other people .' , '

`Oh, Ah! Other people!' interposed Dr' Fell. `Whom else have you investigated and with what result?'

`There's a rumour, Maestro, that Judson Lafarge wasn't in quite a sound enough financial position to retire as comparatively early as he did. But what the hell? In these days, unless a man's a business genius, you can't expect him to retire with a stack of blue chips twenty feet high. I think he did pretty well on Wall Street.'

`We also,' observed Dr Fell, `heard a certain rumour.'

`To the effect, I'd guess, that Lady- Severn, when she was eighteen-year-old Margery Vane, had an illegitimate child who may be in our midst now? Sure; I heard it too. I don't think there's a damn word of truth in it; in any case, how does it help us?

`About the Winfield girl, She's got an apartment in Larchmont with Marion Tarb, who plays Lady Capulet; her old man's a highly respected lawyer in Springfield, Mass, and she's older than she looks. Anne Winfield is no Puritan, but she's not quite the promiscuous so-and-so Barry Plunkett likes to think. And she's got quite a yen for the Irish-man, as you may have noticed. Anyway, how does that help us?'

. `One moment!' said Dr Fell, fumbling in his pocket for the cigar case. `Did you investigate the two points on which I, for my sins, craved enlightenment?'

`I looked for the envelope myself; I couldn't find it. About the

second matter,' Spinelli answered rather cryptically, 'Jenks in New York got 'em to show him the passport, and it contained just the description you thought it would. Spinning any theories, Maestro?'

`Judge Cunningham has been spinning theories - oh, ah! - and very interesting theories they are. With your permission, however, I will hold them in reserve for the end of the evening. Surely, Lieutenant, there was a witness you wanted us to see?' , There was. There is And I'm going to get him now. Stay here; don't stir; you'll shortly learn how loony the evidence can get!'

And he bustled out.

Dr Fell dropped his cloak and shovel-hat on the table under the student's lamp. Producing a cigar and kitchen match,, he bit off the cigar end, spat it out, and ignited the match by whisking it across the seat of his trousers. Blue smoke gusted up above the light.

`Incidentally,' asked Knox,. `why do they call this place a green room,?' "It seems probable,' - I quote the Oxford Companion to the Theatre - "that the Green Room was, so called simply because it was! hung or painted in green..'

`This one is, anyway.' Green walls, green-shaded lamp ...'

`Well, Adam Cayley, was a traditionalist. In Cibber's Love Makes a Man. (Drury Lane, 1700), and again I quote the work in question, Clodio says: "I do know' London pretty well ... ay, and the Green Room, and all the Girls and Women-actresses there." But women, tonight at least, seem not much in evi -'

`Hello!' said a voice.

The door had opened. Anne Winfield and Barry Plunkett, dressed in clothes for street wear,-the former in a champagne-coloured dress with red trimming, the latter in slacks and sports jacket, entered amid a slight mist of alcohol.

`I'm a little elewated, Samivel,' said Mr Plunkett, making a broad gesture; `As the incomparable Tony Weller once remarked, I'm a, little elewated. Good evening, gentlemen!'

`Sir and madam,' intoned Dr Fell, `permit me to offer my heartiest congratulations! It was more than a good evening, I understand; it was a great evening.'

`It wasn't too bad, was it? This little harlot did herself proud.'

`Barry!'

`Well, you did, didn't you?'

`Don't talk like that, please! Anyway, you were wonderful!'

'Wonderful? I was Lousy,'

`Who got fourteen calls?'

`I was so LOUSY, as Churchill said of the bloody Socialists, that any discerning, audience would have birded me in the first act: In justice to myself, though, I might add that 'it was mainly the bloody part, the bloodiest in all the works of W. Spokeshave.. With a- red-haired Romeo yet!'

'Barry; the critics ...'

`Yes, poppet,' the critics; I can see the story: "Shakespeare Wows Them- Again." With a red-haired Romeo. 'Look here!'

Against one wall was a shelf on which rows of empty gin and whisky bottles had been ranked to form a kind of oblong rampart. Reaching up behind this, Barry, Plunkett took down a fragile tin toy of clockwork mechanism. The figure of a red-headed clown in a spotted suit stood with hands attached to a horizontal bar between posts:

`This is Joey the clown. My favourite fornicator gave him to me as a mascot. Even his behaviour is said to resemble mine. I wind him up, so," there was a series of clicks,', `and put him down on the table beside Dr Fell's hat. Endlessly he whirls over and over the horizontal bar. You see?

`But observe something else. The whole toy is moving with the vibration of the clockwork; it's creeping towards the edge of the table. I can't keep Joey in my dressing room. Everybody who comes in winds him up to watch him pet, form. If he fell off a table, this table, he'd smash. I stop, him with my finger - thus. I am absolutely without sentiment, but we can't have Joey smashed,'

He snatched up; the clown, held it in the air until the clockwork with a last whir had run down, and replaced Joey on the table.

`You haven't any sentiment at all, have you?' breathed Anne

Winfield, 'He guards that silly toy from the five-and-dime,' she said happily, 'as though I'd given him treasures out of Golconda!'

'I am rather attached to the thing, strumpet. He has great power as a good-luck charm; he prevented me from being booed off the stage in disgrace. By the way, old boy,' Mr Plunkett looked at Knox, 'I'm supposed to be giving a party at the Lone Tree Tavern.'

'The party is already under way. Soda siphonss have been squirted in all; directions; the Mayor of Richbell, though crowned with a chair for temporary quietus-'

'It's not so tame here, either. Kate Hamilton is three sheets in the wind; Prince Escalus has passed out. This baggage and I thought, if we crept off quietly to the pub, it would be a hint for the others to follow. It fell fiat; nobody even seems to have noticed. our departure. But what I really wanted to ask: it's. about the CDU.'

'The CDU?'

'Central Detective Unit; in Ireland, that's what they call the CID at Dublin Castle, Sorry, I mean Lieutenant Spinelli, Is he still detecting?'

'Still detecting,'

'Scuttlebutt has it he's nabbed the famous Weary Willie. Is it true?'

'Yes. He's bringing Willie to be questioned by Dr Fell,'

'This I must hear. Do you think, if my favourite fornicator and I sat quietly in a comer and made no noise, he'd let us stay and not sling us out?'

'You can try it, anyway.'

'Oh, Barry, really!' cried .Anne. Winfield, 'If you go on calling me harlot and strumpet and fornicator, and describe in great detail the perfectly ghastly things I'm supposed to do, you'll have people half believing; it and you'll end by making me really angry!; Where is the lieutenant, anyway?'

It was unnecessary to answer, Lieutenant Spinelli, entering at that moment with a gesture that suggested end-man in a children's game of crack-the-whip, propelled before him what might or might not be called an object.

The object, thin and scrawny and middle-sized, was perhaps the same age as Judge Graham Cunningham. White hair patched the sides of an otherwise bald head. First of all you observed his shaky hand and bleared, wandering eye. Then you observed his cleanliness. His old blue shirt, though faded and frayed and collarless to show a brass collar-button, had been mended and kept in repair. Coat and trousers, shabby to dissolution point, gave signs of a recent cleaning; fumes of gasoline overcame the fumes of raw wine. There were nicks on cheeks and chin where he had cut himself shaving.

`Now, Willie!' said Lieutenant Spinelli. `The stout man sitting on the sofa with the cigar is Dr Gideon Fell, who's something of an authority on the tomfoolery of crime. The other one is Mr Philip Knox, the historian, who did a fine bit of detective work last night. If you know what's good for you, don't lie to either of 'em.'

`I don't lie, Lieutenant,' the object protested in a husky voice. `You ask anybody in Richbell: old Willie doesn't tell lies!'

`I've heard a lot' about your antics, Willie, but I'd like to know something about you. What's your full name?'

`Since I'm not signing any cheques, does it matter?'

`It's going to matter when I book you. Where do you live?' `Know Mr Daniel Foster's estate? Bedivere Avenue, off Lone Tree Road? Finest neighbourhood in Richbell? Mr Foster lets me sleep in a shack behind the Japanese garden: he's a fine man, Mr Foster is!'

`What do you do for a living? If you can tank up on Sneaky Pete, you must be getting money from somebody,

How do you earn it or beg it or steal it?' `Steal it, Lieutenant? Old Willie?' `Well?'

`Every good lady in Richbell's got work for old Willie; you ask 'em! Mow lawns, weed gardens in spring and summer; gather up leaves in fall; shovel snow in winter. If they haven't got work at any particular time, maybe they just hand me fifty cents or a dollar. You'll say that's begging, but it's not! It's not begging when you don't ask for it; if they want to give me something when I haven't asked, that's their business. And why do they do it? 'Cause I'm clean, that's why! Soap and water don't cost much; there's something that doesn't cost much on this earth!'

`I said I was going to book you; I wasn't kidding. You've really done

it this time; you've got Mr Lafarge sore, and you're going to jail.'

`They won't put me in jail, I bet, if I prove I'm the guardian angel of this theatre, and know more about it than they do! Mr Lafarge is the business manager, isn't he? Only they call him the treasurer now, don't they?'

`What do you know. about it, Willie? We can tell by your speech you've come down in the world. What were you before you hit Skid Row? What do you know about it?'

`Never you mind what I know about it!'

'All right. For the moment - not that it'll do you any good - we won't mind. Just tell these people the story you told me, and God help you if you contradict yourself.'

`You wouldn't have a little drink for old Willie, would you?'

`No, I would not!'

'Just one little drink for old Willie?' pleaded the derelict. `My insides are jumping like a hooked fish; my hand's jumping too: see? You've got to admit I could talk better if I had just one little drink?'

`Well, 'maybe you could, at that. But there's no booze here!'

`I can get him a drink, Lieutenant,' offered Barry Plunkett. `I can get him a drink, if it's all right with you?'

`O K, but make it a short one!'

Not without courtesy the actor addressed Willie.

`Can't offer you Sneaky Pete, I'm afraid,' he said. `Take your choice, though, of Scotch or rye or bourbon. What'll it be?'

`A nice drop of rye, now,' said Willie, with his bleared eye flickering round, `would be just what the doctor ordered. Old Willie thanks you, young man; and make it a long one if you possibly can. Old Willie-'

`All right!' snapped Lieutenant Spinelli, torn between sternness and a reluctant sympathy. `Get the rummy his medicine; but don't mess around, and hurry back!'

At the door Barry Plunkett beckoned so fiercely behind Lieutenant Spinelli's back that Knox followed him out into the corridor. Mr

Plunkett closed the door.

`You see? If he didn't throw us out in the first minute, I knew he wasn't going to throw us out at all. This way; back towards the scene-dock, and then across to the opposite side.'

`Right; I'm with you.'

`Let's see: I asked if he was still detecting. What do you think of the little Winfield, by the way?'

`Just between ourselves, I think you might, treat her better.'

`Don't I wish I could! I wish I could pick her up and take her ... no, not to my own country. In every song about Ireland, all of 'em originating in America during the eighteen nineties or thereabouts, the exile warbles about his ache for the owld sod. Not this exile, thanks; the climate's too lousy for even the natives to take. And nobody else goes back either, except for a week's visit to crow over relatives in Galway or Donegal. But look here, old boy: I didn't ask what you thought about me; I know I'm a louse; I asked what you thought of her.'

`Anne Winfield., She's delightful. I wish a certain other woman talked to [me as](#)

she talks to you.'

`You mean that golden-eyed dish you're married to?' 'Yes, I mean that golden-eyed dish I'm married to.' `She's bonkers about you, old boy.

`"Bonkers" is hardly a well-chosen word. Sometimes, I think Judy may be then she gets sassy again and King Solomon himself couldn't tell. But if there's one thing certain in this world, it's what Anne Winfield thinks about, you.'

`Anne's a tramp, God damn it! She's-'

`That's not so certain, is it? Inn fact, it's very doubtful. Still! Even if it were so, would, it matter all, that much to you?'

`No; how did you guess?-That's; the hell of it: I'm scatty about the little hot-pants; in my heart I don't give a damn. And I didn't actually catch her, getting down, to business with that rat Delevan, though she was in his dressing room. But there's the trouble with these women:

give 'em one concession of affection, just one, and they've got you in a corner you can't get out of Besides ...'

They had crossed behind the stage and emerged into the corridor at the far side, near the stairs leading to the dressing rooms above.

'Besides,' Barry Plunkett said with unwonted gravity, 'I may have my own troubles. I've asked twice whether Lieutenant Spinelli is detecting. If he still thinks I stood in the wings and skewered our Snow Queen with a crossbow-bolt, being arrested for murder wouldn't be the most acceptable kind of present for a prospective bride, now would it? Wait here, old boy; wait while I get the liquor from my dressing room. If anybody comes up and wants to speak to you, shoo him away.

Off he went, leaving Knox beside the stairs.

'If anybody comes up' and wants to speak to you ...'

Nobody did. Such sounds of revelry as he could distinguish seemed to proceed from dressing rooms on the floor above. He could see nobody in this corridor except a little group of three standing at the other end, near the steps down to the pass door.

One of these, surprisingly, was young Lawrence Porter. But - why should this be surprising? The second member of the group was fat Kate Hamilton, no longer Juliet's nurse but in street clothes and with a fur-piece round her neck, talking to Porter in a low, rapid voice. As for the third person, the elderly makeup of Lady Capulet hitherto had prevented Knox from spotting her as Marion Tarb, Anne Winfield's roommate, a girl who must be considerably younger than Anne herself. The two unimpeachable witnesses: Porter's alibi. Other faces, if only in imagination, seemed to gather round them. Judson Lafarge, Connie. Lafarge, Judy, and (disconcertingly) Mayor Jenkins of Richbell.

Well who was the murderer?

Knox stood and fretted.

In a detective novel, he supposed, the culprit would prove to be Lawrence Porter himself. Having once been scrutinized and cleared completely, he could be put aside. He was not above suspicion; better still, as in another case solved by Dr Fell, he was below it. Then a stroke of ingenuity would explain, away that alibi; just cause would be shown why Porter, with an immense monthly allowance from his

father in Kentucky, needed first to steal jewels before returning them; and the forgotten character would bob up snarling as the real murderer.

Except that. . . 'except that

No, it wouldn't do! Little familiar as Knox might be with modern crime in real life, he thought he knew better than this. It was too fortuitous; it was too much like the romantic notion which made Anne Winfield a daughter of Margery Vane. Allow something to coincidence, as life itself does, but the whole pattern of events is not arranged so conveniently as all this.

Besides, what of the method? Whether you attacked Margery Vane from the front of the box or the back, how did you persuade your victim to stand and await your fire?

Knox had little opportunity to ponder this. Back strode Barry Plunkett, carrying a tumbler with a drink so long it must have contained nearly all whisky and very little water or soda. He addressed himself, to the group at the other end of the corridor. But he did not go near them; he merely raised, his voice.

`Kate!' he called. 'Wotcher, Kate!'

`Well, stap me, sirrah!' Miss Hamilton's contralto bellowed back. 'Wotcher yourself, and how's the, great lover?' `Looking for a chance to love. Kate, are you sober?' `Sober enough; I always am. Why?' `Are you wearing a watch, Kate?'

`Yes; see?' She held up her left wrist. `Think I'm not sober enough to tell the time, or what?' `No, no, it's nothing like that!'

`Then what is't, beshrew me?'

`Keep your, eye on your watch,' said Barry Plunkett. `Wait five minutes; then come to the green room. If you need an excuse, say you're looking for a bottle; you'll see a whole shelf of empty ones. There's' something I want you to do there.'

`Fair enough, O'Sullivan, but what do you want me to do?'

`I want you to speak up if you see anybody you knew here thirty-seven years ago. Now there may be nothing in this; it may only be a wild idea; I may be as crazy as you are.'

`The man's flattery,' yelled Miss Hamilton, `grows more nauseating

each minute. Still fair enough, Brian Boru. But I'm not the harp that once through Tara's halls, you know. Thirty-seven years is a hell of a long tune.'

'I know, but I'm counting on you. And don't argue with me, my sweet. In five minutes get your can over to the green room, where Mr Knox and I are going now. Come along, old boy.'

This time he led the way across the stage, under a ghostly glow of battens.

Little had changed-in the green room. Dr Fell, mountainously piled on a sofa, puffed at the glowing cigar under a thickening cloud of smoke. Timorous-looking Anne Winfield sat beside him. Willie, occupying a brocaded chair opposite the doctor, was shaking so badly that, as he sprang up to run at the newcomers, he all but pitched headlong over his own feet.

'Easy, Willie!' said Barry Plunkett. 'Here you are, but take it easy!'

'I don't know that I ought to allow this.' Lieutenant Spinelli made half a move to seize the glass. 'That's quite a slug of bug-juice, young fellow; we don't want him getting cockeyed again before he's told us anything at all.'

'Eyewash, Leonardo da Vinci, a little of this stuff never hurt anybody! Just- go easy, Willie; take the glass in both hands; you'll be right again in two ticks.'

Willie did so, the glass chattering against his teeth. He gulped, shuddered, lowered the tumbler in both hands, and waited before gulping again. After a third gulp, at the end of a time during which you might have counted slowly to a hundred, with a steady hand he set down the glass on the table beside the tin figure of Joey the clown.

A certain stateliness had come into his bearing.

'Still half full, see? Old Willie's not greedy. Thanks, young man; you're a life-saver. You remind me a little of Adam Cayley in his best days'

'Now what the hell,' snapped Lieutenant Spinelli, 'would that bum know of Adam Cayley?'

'You're not as handsome as he was, or as impressive either. Nobody's as impressive today as people used to be. But it's the same accent, practically the same voice. Now who's got a cigarette for old Willie?'

Producing cigarettes, Barry Plunkett gave one to Willie, one to Knox, took one himself, and lighted all three. More blue smoke drifted up.

`Now hear me, Willie, and hear me good!' said Lieutenant Spinelli. 'If there's any idea this is going to turn into a party, you've got another think coming. Do you tell the maestro, or don't you?'

Carrying the drink and cigarette, Willie scuttled back to the brocaded chair.

`I'm going to tell him, Lieutenant! So help me, I'm going to tell him. Don't hustle old Willie, that's all Don't-'

`First, how do you keep getting into this theatre so nobody sees you? Is there a secret entrance?'

`Secret entrance? Horsefeathers, Lieutenant!' Willie spoke rather grandly., `Utter and complete horsefeathers, that's what it is. What manager'd have a secret entrance to a place like this, when he just wants to see 'em crowding in the front door? It's only that they never remember how many ways in there are; they always forget to bar one of 'em. Last night they forgot the lobby door that leads to the alley. Mr Lafarge came back and got in that way at two o'clock in the morning, didn't he? Old Willie knows! Old Willie--'

This time it was the door of the green room which opened. In the doorway loomed the jowl and bust of Kate Hamilton.

`I was looking for a bottle, but it seems I've got one,' she announced, holding up a fifth of Scotch about a third depleted.

While Willie looked at her, Kate Hamilton's own gaze - wandered round the room. It encountered Willie, passed on to the playbills, and suddenly returned to him.

`Well, sweet - Jesus!' she said.

`Yes, Kate?' Barry Plunkett almost jumped at her: `What is it?'

`If I hadn't been told to watch out for somebody I once knew, I could have slept with the damn man and never recognized him.'

`Yes, Kate?'

`And I'm not positive even now. Some are dead; some are retired;

some just faded away. If I didn't think it couldn't be...'

Uncapping the bottle,' she tilted it to her mouth and took a deep pull.

'If I didn't think it couldn't be,' she repeated, 'I'd swear that blear-eyed monstrosity there was Will Estabrook, who used to be business manager, but took to drink and went downhill so fast you couldn't see him for dust.'

'Not so far downhill, Kate,' said the blear-eyed monstrosity, 'not so very far downhill. And you'd better get used to the idea, because that's just, who I am. I can help 'em, too. I'm the only one who saw Marge Vane shot with a crossbow-bolt because two of 'em were in cahoots against her.'

15 GOBLIN MASK

'AND You, Kate, you're just as striking as you ever were!'

'Me?'

'I' never said you were pretty, Kate; you're not even sweet-faced now. I said you were a striking woman, and you still are

'Sir,' began Dr Fell, addressing Willie with great politeness, 'you tell us you saw the lady shot?'

'Oh, I did! Old Willie-'

'You be careful, rummy!' snarled Lieutenant Spinelli.

'Please, Lieutenant! Don't call me a rummy or a lush. I hate that. "Alcoholic" is just as bad, it's fake" science, like so much nowadays. I'm a drunkard, which is better and honester. Call me a drunkard, Lieutenant, and let me keep my dignity!'

'Mr Estabrook,' continued Dr Fell, 'where were you when you saw her shot?'

'I'd been in the balcony, see? That's old Willie's favourite place; that's where they found me tonight. I'd been in the balcony. But 'I got sort of interested. As the third act began I slipped down from the balcony.'

'How did you get down from the balcony?'

`Little stairs in the passage outside Box B at balcony level down to the passage outside Box. A at dress-circle level. There were two women sitting together in the front row of the dress circle. But I didn't stay there. I went on down to this floor.'

How drunk were you?' demanded' Lieutenant Spinelli.

`Oh, I'd had a few. But I knew what I was doing; don't think I didn't! Thinks I to myself: I'll take a peek backstage. So I went through the pass door...'

`Did you see anybody else down there?'

`Yes, Lieutenant. I saw that gentleman,' Willie nodded at Knox, `come up the side aisle and cross over to the middle. I saw you, Lieutenant, following him like somebody stalking game in the woods. That's all.'

Sir,' asked Dr Fell, the light glinting on his skew-wiff eyeglasses, `are you sure: you saw nobody else at that time?'

`Yes, sir, I'm sure. I knew there were people around; you can sort of feel it when there are people around but I didn't see anybody until I got behind the scenes in the wings. And nobody saw me:: _ .

`Mercutio and Benvolio,' Willie looked at Barry Plunkett, `you and another man in those funny clothes went on from that side and said your first; lines. Tybalt and some more people came in from the other' side, and Romeo after them from the same side.

`I won't say I was scared; I was too, well padded to be scared. But I was strung up. Because we were coming near the part where Adam Cayley dropped dead, and a fine-looking man he was, except he had no judgement, all those years ago when poor old Willie was Mr Estabrook and respected by everybody.'

Willie paused for a moment. He picked up his drink from the floor and gulped down half of what was left. The cigarette had burned almost to his fingers, stubbing it out against the side of a battered shoe, he dropped the butt on the linoleum floor.

`I wonder if I can remember any of the lines? Old Willie's memory isn't what it was. "Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk?" And I looked up and across. And there was Marge Vane sitting and watching in Box C. What a pretty thing she was in the old days! But not a bit prettier, sir, than the young lady who's sitting beside you on the sofa

now.'

`Thank you,' said Anne Winfield, inclining her head. `Oh, thank you! What did you see?'

`Well, miss. Mercutio fought Tybalt, and Tybalt stabbed him. Mercutio, that's you,' again Willie looked at Barry Plunkett, `said your last lines. "A plague a both your houses," you said; not "A plague on both your houses" as people usually give it. I could hear very well, being so close. Benvolio sort of supported you off the stage, to the wings not far from where I was. And I'll tell you what you said to him. You said, "Don't get back on that stage too quick, for something's sake; give me time to die." Isn't that what you said?'

`Yes,' answered Barry Plunkett. `Bear witness, Lieutenant; it was exactly what I said.'

`Well! Benvolio did go back pretty quickly; not much more'n twenty seconds, I reckon. He said Mercutio was dead, and Romeo said-'

`Now just a minute, Willie!' snapped Lieutenant Spinelli. `Never mind what they were doing on the stage; we know that. What did Mr Plunkett do?'

`Turned around and went into his dressing room and shut the door,'

`Would you swear to that in court?'

`I'd swear to it on a stack of Bibles!'

`Did you see him afterwards?'

`No, Lieutenant, leastways,, not to notice him. On the stage, Tybalt and Romeo had started to fight. Thinks I to myself: Well, anyway, we're past the point where Adam Cayley dropped dead. I didn't know something else was coming.'

'And I was in a crap game!' cried Kate Hamilton. `God help my Baptist forebears, I was in a crap game and winning money!'

`Mr Estabrook,' said Dr Fell, `please go on with your story.'

Willie lifted the tumbler, finished his drink, and set down the glass again. Barry Plunkett provided him with another cigarette and lighted it.

"I don't know what made me look around,' Willie continued,

'towards what we've been calling the corridor with the doors along it. But I did look. And a man was coming along there with a crossbow in his hands.'

`Who was it?' demanded Lieutenant Spinelli.

`Lieutenant, how do I know? I've already told you: he was wearing a head-and-face mask one of the kind so many people wore in the scene of the dance at the Capulets'. And he had on a suit of those funny clothes: - Elizabethan, aren't they called? But the clothes were all black.'

`Willie,' Barry-Plunkett said with decision, 'the only man wearing black, last night or tonight either, was Lee Huxley as Tybalt. And Lee was on the stage all the time.'

`You've got a wardrobe, haven't you? In the old days, we had a wardrobe and a wardrobe mistress too!'

`Yes, there's a-wardrobe. 'We're doing several Shakespeare plays, we can't keep using the same clothes, all the time. I suppose somebody could have. ...'

`With your permission,' roared Dr Fell, `shall we avoid: the "could haves" and stick to; the "dids"? What did, this strange goblin do? What did you do?'

`I didn't move; old Willie was petrified: The crossbow was wound up - it didn't have a sling like the others - and there was an arrow-thing in the groove. If the man with the mask saw me at all, which I guess he didn't because of what he had on his mind, he must have.: thought by my clothes I was one of the stagehands, and no more looked at me than he'd have looked at a piece of scenery. Then he walked past me out on the stage ...'

`Out on the stage?' asked Lieutenant Spinelli. `In full view of those who were watching?'

`Lieutenant, I'm telling you! Later last night, when you questioned witnesses, I overheard a lot of yelling about that very thing. Who did see him except me? People were all watching a duel at the other side of the stage.; Besides, he didn't go out more'n a step or so from behind a part of the - wings painted to look like the edge of a house.

`But I'm getting ahead of my story. Just before he stepped out on the stage, I looked up at Box C. And Marge Vane' was-' Willie stopped.

`Was what?' Dr Fell said sharply.

`Sir, she wasn't taking so much interest in the play. The lights made it a little hard to see details, but I could see well enough. She was

restless, as if she might have been waiting for something. She looked back over her shoulder, and I know now what it meant. They say old Willie can't think

very straight these says; but I can think; I know what that meant. Somebody she was expecting had tapped at the door or called to her through it.

`So she got up. She turned her back and started towards the door to open it. The man in the mask lifted his crossbow. Whap!' said Willie, and struck, his hands together with a noise that made them jump. He took the cigarette from his mouth, threw it down, and trod-on it. `It happened just as Tybalt was falling. The bow fired; the cord broke. But the bolt hit poor Marge under the left shoulder-blade, and over she went as if she'd been hit by an express train. The man in the mask...'

The man in the mask, I suppose,' Lieutenant Spinelli was heavily sarcastic, `the man in the, mask turned around, bowed to you, and walked away whistling with his bow over his shoulder.'

`Lieutenant, he 'didn't! He took one step forward, just one long step, and down he went smoothly and easily on an automatic trap door already prepared for him, if it was the trap I think it was from the old days. And now will somebody give poor Willie another little drink?'

`Here!' offered Kate Hamilton.

Hurrying forward, she snatched up the empty tumbler, poured in a generous measure of Scotch, and handed tumbler and bottle to Willie.

`You're not giving him another slug; Scotch on top of rye, and the bottle too! Not while I ... Oh, well!' snapped Lieutenant` Spinelli. `Keep the bottle; stick it in your pocket. You don't seem any drunker than you did earlier in the evening. But I ask you, Maestro;; did you ever hear as crazy a story as this? People in masks! Trap doors!'

`Crazy it maybe,' declared Barry Plunkett, `but so is the whole situation. And this could: very well have happened.'

You too?'

`Yes, Lieutenant. Should the suggestion of a trap door upset you, you'd better learn there's just such an ingenious automatic trap in the position Willie describes. Ask Philip Knox; I was telling him about it shortly before the third act began ' Rapidly the actor explained. `As

you yourself claimed last night, when you were more than half convinced not hear. He shushed her by holding her and putting a hand across her mouth.

`Lieutenant,' he said, `try to believe there's no reason why any artist on the stage. should have seen one bloody thing. They had lines and business. As for setting the trap mechanism, that could have been done at any earlier time.'

`All right! Set the mechanism now; get the crossbow and load it. You'll cease to be Mercutio; you'll become the alleged masked man.'

`Do you want the floats on too?' `The what?'

`The footlights!'

`No; we needn't be as realistic as all that. Willie,' bawled Lieutenant Spinelli, 'when you first saw the masked man you say was there, where was he coming from?'

`Now 'how would I know that, Lieutenant? He was just walking along!'

`O K, then. Hop over to the other side and show us where you claim; you were standing-when it happened. Let's see, now. What characters were on the stage at that time?'

`Only three,' replied Knox. `Romeo, Benvolio, and Tybalt. Tybalt, who had fled after stabbing Mercutio, re-entered from this side, the right, and Romeo challenged him.'

`We'd better take it from there, then. Dr Fell, you be Romeo; Mr Knox, you be Tybalt. Miss Hamilton, will you stand in for Benvolio?'

`Fair enough, Sherlock Holmes,' boomed Kate. `I've played everything else in my time; I might as well have a crack at Benvolio too.'

`The role of Romeo,' said Dr Fell, with a kind of thunderous modesty, `is one to which in my wildest dreams I have never aspired, and for which no producer outside Bedlam would ever cast me. Besides I can't remember all the words.'

`I don't want you to remember the words, Maestro! Just give something, give anything, to set the atmosphere. Then you and lair Knox go for each other with imaginary swords and daggers - you can use your cane as the sword - and pretend you're really concentrating

on the fight until you hear me say, "Now".

`It's true that Tony Ferrara and Lee Huxley and Ben Radford, who played those three parts both at the rehearsal and tonight, swear they never looked, at anything except each other after Benvolio came back from assisting Mercutio off. Even Lee Huxley as Tybalt, who was facing in that direction when he, got his lumps from Romeo, says he was concentrated on his dying fall and wouldn't have seen a pink elephant on the stage or off it. You three know what to expect; you can't help a glance or two towards that side. But look as lithe as possible.' Lieutenant Spinelli broke off. `Willie! Mr Plunkett!'

'Yes, Lieutenant?' called two voices.

`Willie,. Out that bottle back in your pocket! Mr Plunkett, hold it there for just a second! I've got something else to tell you.'

He raced across to the other: side, and spoke to them in a low voice. Then Barry' Plunkett and Anne Winfield disappeared into shadow. Lieutenant Spinelli also disappeared. Willie, the bottle of Scotch tilted to his mouth, drew farther back.

And, the charade, began.

The. stage had been set for `Verona, a public place', with which the play would begin on the following evening. The curtains were fully open on what seemed an empty, theatre. At Kate Hamilton's imperious :gesture, Knox drew back between the fronts of two houses on the right. He felt selfconscious and rather light in the legs. None the less, at his cue of 'Here comes the furious Tybalt back again', he swaggered on with as fair an imitation as he could contrive.

Dr Fell, despite the protest about not knowing the words, accurately roared out Romeo's promise of vengeance for Mercutio. Tybalt promised death in return.' Dr Fell said, `This shall determine that,' and slashed with his stick for the first cut in another kind of mock battle.

It was not possible for one of Dr Fell's bulk to achieve much dancing or cut-and-thrust. But he did his best. Knox, wielding sword and dagger of air, kept the play at what he could remember of last night's pattern. Dr Fell's eyeglasses tumbled off on their black ribbon; his breathing grew more laboured.

'Archons of Athens, how long does this go on?'

`It was a fairly long fight, as such fights go. I'm swinging round now,

to face the side of the stage I came from ...' `Oh, ah?'

`When I swing back again to face the opposite side, count to twenty and then get me.'

`How? With the dagger, as by the descriptions most of them did?'

`No; with what looked like a forehand cut between shoulder and neck. It was expertly faked, or they wore padding. Ready ?'

`Have at you, villain!'

Knox, as he manoeuvred for the first position, glanced up towards Box C. He could make out its curved ledge with the gilt and white crusting, the red curtain at one side, and, in gloom at the back, the white-painted door.

Back he swung, his eyes moving to the other side. Barry Plunkett, with the air of one playing Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street, could be seen in the wings. His left arm cradled a crossbow, its cord taut; his right forefinger was on the trigger.

Dr Fell wheezed in and struck lightly with his-cane at the junction of Knox's neck and left shoulder.- The latter loosened his knees to fall.

`Now!' yelled Lieutenant Spinelli. And then: `Don't fire the damn bow! I told, you not to f-!'

Barry Plunkett pulled the trigger.

Again the vicious snap as the cord banged across the head; but, this time, a sharp whack . of four-pointed iron through wood. Knox arrested his fall. All of them, craning towards Box C, could see the bolt buried in the white door.

From Box C issued a ringing oath. Into view rose the figure of a uniformed policeman, a cigarette in his left hand and his right hand fallen to the-butt of the police-positive revolver at his hip.

'Paulson?' shouted Lieutenant Spinelli. `Is that you, Paulson ?'

`Yes, sir, Lieutenant, sir?'

`What the hell are you doing there?'

Jeez, Lieutenant, you didn't tell me to do no investigating. You just said stand by. I was sitting on the sofa having a smoke, that's all, and

some damn loony-'

`It was a loony, was it? Maybe it was, at that. But-'

`Look, Lieutenant, it might 'a hit me!'

`Serve you God-damn right if it had. Now get that thing out of the door and bring it down here to me.'

There was a pause for inspection.

Jeez, Lieutenant, it's gone half through the door and out the other side!'

`Did you hear what I said? Get the lead out of your pants; make it snappy!'

`Having a good time, Lieutenant Spinelli?' asked Kate Hamilton.

Carlo Spinelli assumed an oratorical stance.

`Well, no,' he answered, after thought. `On the whole, I can't say I'm having the best time since my honeymoon.'

`Easy, dearie! Not going to blow your sack, are you?'

`With the source of sound so hard to identify,' said Lieutenant Spinelli, `and fast music being played to cover the noise when it hit her you know, this just might have happened. I still don't think it did. I was out there watching last night; I don't see how it could have happened smack under my eyes, not if Barnum & Bailey's three-ring circus happened to be playing at the other side of the stage. But-!'

Miss Hamilton pointed to a square opening in the wooden floor of the stage, a short way back from the concrete apron and a few steps out from the wings.

`Where's Barry Plunkett?' she asked.

Smoothly, easily, the floor of a trap rose out of darkness, with the gentleman, in question on it and holding up the crossbow.

`He's here, sweet Kate. Didn't see me go down, did you?'

`I saw you go down,' said Lieutenant Spinelli. `And I very nearly jumped down after you, to wring your neck. All RIGHT! Take it easy, everybody! If it happened that way and it's a very big if - I can tell you

exactly how it happened. Chase along back to the green room, everybody, and I'll show you.'

A repentant Officer Paulson, hurrying down through the auditorium with the crossbow-bolt in his hand, was bawled out and told to remain within call. Anne Winfield at her most spiritual materialized from the wings, and made for the green room with her head on Barry Plunkett's shoulder. Kate Hamilton and Knox and Dr Fell followed, with Lieutenant Spinelli shepherding them.

The door was closed. The student's lamp shed its serene light on Dr Fell's hat and cloak, and on the tin figure of Joey the clown. Lieutenant Spinelli took up a commanding position at the table..

`According to Willie .' Once more he, broke off, galvanized. `Willie! Where's Willie?'

Nobody could say. A shout brought Officer Paulson's head in at the door.

`Find Weary Willie,' roared the harassed lieutenant. `Last seen in the wings on the other side of the stage. Get Willie, Paulson, or you'll be back pounding a beat nobody could like; hear me?'

`On my, way, Lieutenant.' The door closed.

`Now, then! If I carry this any further, let's see what I've got to tell the DA. Three witnesses on the stage Tony Ferrara, Lee Huxley, Ben Radford - saw nothing.- Seven witnesses in the audience - Judge Cunningham, Miss Harkness, Mrs Knox, Mr and Mrs Lafarge, Mr Knox and thyself - didn't see a thing either. Yet a man in black clothes and a mask plugged Lady Severn with a crossbow-bolt like the one in my hand and went down by the trap. He sent the trap up empty Without anybody seeing that either. Afterwards, I guess, there are ways he could have sneaked back-up to the auditorium, and dropped the bow on the floor before the alarm went off?'

`There are several ways,' agreed Barry Plunkett.

`Nobody but a dare-devil lunatic would have pulled a stunt like that. Nobody but a dare-devil lunatic would have risked a wonky bow in the first place, as judge Cunningham said. I don't want the D A to think I'm nuts. Still, since a lot of you seem to agree that's what happened, there's only one person who pulled a stunt like that.'

`All right, I'll buy it,' snapped Barry Plunkett. `Who "pulled the

stunt"?'

Lieutenant Spinelli looked him in the eye. `You did,' he said.

16

TWO AM

'Good God! are we back on that subject again?'

`We never really left it, did we?'

`I thought we did. I told you' '

`You didn't tell me very much, did you?'

Barry Plunkett' had flung down the borrowed bow on a sofa and retreated a little. Lieutenant Spinelli. crowded after him, as though with the intention of getting him [literally in](#)

a corner.

`If you ask me,' he continued, `this is called the double bluff.'

`Double bluff?'

`Sure; it's' occurred before in one or two of the maestro's cases. Last night,' as Mercutio, you were wearing a conspicuous blue and silver outfit. Willie saw you go back to your dressing room. He didn't see you afterwards; or, to be exact, he said he didn't see you to notice you. You're no fool, Irish; maybe a crazy stunt like this was the safest bet after all.

`You went to your dressing room. Who'd think that you would change into black tights and a mask, and walk back as though you were somebody else? All you stage people have to be quick-change artists; I know that.'

`Lieutenant, you're off your rocker! We've got a possible method, - that's all. You've shown how it could have been done ..."

'No, young fellow,' retorted Lieutenant Spinelli; `you've shown how it could have been done. I set a little trap, and you walked into it as I figured you would.'

'Trap?'

`What do you think it was? I'm a little sorry about this, Irish you're not such a bad sort, in your way. But I'm a cop; I must go by the evidence. Who'd imagine you would dress up and pull a double bluff like this?'

`You would,' the other shot back. `You did. You already have. If you're arresting me-'

`No, I'm not booking you; not just yet. I need more evidence, and I go by the evidence.'

`If you go by the evidence,' yelled Barry Plunkett, `for God's sake do it. Lieutenant, you're as mad as a March hare! Why did I kill the woman?' What was my motive?'

`In law, young fellow, the prosecution doesn't have to show motive.'

`In law they don't,' returned the actor, using the plural instead of the singular. `But that's only another polite fiction. In any democratic country, America or England or Ireland either, they must prove a very strong motive or no jury will ever convict. As a copper you know that better than we do.'

`I'll get the motive, Irish, as soon as I have a little talk with ... Dr Fell!' yelled Lieutenant Spinelli. `Where's Dr Fell?'

He was not there, though he had been there a few moments before. It did not seem possible that one of Dr Fell's proportions could fade away unobserved. But Knox, who was familiar with this disconcerting trick on the doctor's part, felt constrained to mention it. He was interrupted by the hurried entrance of Officer Paulson.

`Weary Willie-'

`What about him, Paulson?'

`He's there all right, Lieutenant. On the floor. Passed out cold with a bottle of Scotch in his pocket.'

`Passed out cold, has he? Fine witness he turned out to be!'

`Yeah, that's what I mean. The DA's not going to like it,

Lieutenant, if you let him get plastered all over again.' `Never you mind what the DA'll like, Paulson. The DA can take a flying ... No, no, I don't mean that either!'

`Sure you don't, Lieutenant. You've just got a bug up, that's all. What do you want me to do with Willie?'

`Better haul him to the station and throw him in the tank.

Tomorrow morning we'll ask Mr Lafarge what charges ...'

`Charges, eh? And who's using my name again?'

Judson Lafarge, in white tie and tails with the tie askew and the shirt front rumpled, made a majestic if somewhat muzzy-eyed entrance.

`Barry,' he said, `we were expecting you and Anne at the Lone Tree. I've already congratulated everybody, haven't I? You've done it, old socks: you've kicked the hoodoo and busted the jinx! We won't go broke after all, or at least not yet. But you should have turned up earlier; the party's over, the bar's closed. And did I hear somebody mention Weary Willie?'

`That's just what you did, Mr Lafarge.' Lieutenant Spinelli bustled forward. `Only he's not exactly Weary Willie in the way we thought. His real name is William Estabrook,, in 1928 he held the same position with this company that you hold now;; he's down on his luck, and apparently he gets a boost from haunting the old place. But that doesn't excuse his conduct, I agree! We'll throw him in the tank overnight; tomorrow, if you tell me what charges you want preferred ...'

`Charges,' for God's sake? Who said anything about charges?'

`You did! Last night you wanted his blood! You said-'

`Down on his luck, is he? In these hard times, Sergeant, it might happen to me or you or anybody else. Look! Put him on ice overnight. Tomorrow morning,' Mr Lafarge peeled off a bill from a thick roll, `give him this five-spot and tell him to come and see me at 318 Old Manor Road, Farleigh, Connecticut. We don't want to be too hard on the poor bastard.'

`And as you would say, Father Jud,' interposed Barry Plunkett, `that's not all. It's not all by a long shot. Have you any idea of the story Willie's been telling, and what Lieutenant Spinelli makes of it?'

In five terse sentences he outlined the situation, omitting no important point.

`He claims I did it,' shouted Barry Plunkett. `Do you understand that, Father Jud? He claims I did it.'

`No kidding,' said Mr Lafarge. `Well, I'd better be off.

Do you people know what time it is?' He looked at Knox.

`Do you know, Phil?'

'No; I've lost track. But where's Judy?'

`Out in the car with Connie. Hadn't you better join us?' `There's still business here, I'm afraid. Will you ask Judy to wait for me?'

`Better not, old horse. I don't see why you and Judy can't spend the night with us; plenty of room. But she wouldn't hear of it; says she's got to get back to New York. Tell you what, though. There's another bar up the road, John Richbell's Place, that stays open until three. By this time Connie's had a few; she's not so censorious now. Judy's had a few too Join us there when you've finished. Look! Why don't all of you come and – ‘

`Sorry, Mr Lafarge,' Lieutenant Spinelli .held hard to his temper, `but it's out of the question!'

`If only,' began Barry Plunkett, `I could persuade somebody this thing is bloody serious ...'

Serious?' inquired: Judson Lafarge. `Think no more of it, Barry. You're twice as crazy as a bedbug, but you never killed anybody and you never would. Well, I guess that's everything. See you later, Phil.

Throwing back his shoulders, humming a bar or two of

Boola, Boola , he marched out.

`You don't have to persuade me it's serious, Irish,' continued Lieutenant Spinelli. 'I know it's serious; it'll get; more so. All I want is a word with Dr Fell! Where do you suppose he's got to?'

Officer Paulson intervened.

`By Dr Fell,' he asked, `Do you mean the big fat guy with the eyeglasses, the one who keeps, walking into things: because he don't see 'em ? He's in the balcony?'

`Paulson, what's he up to in the balcony?'

`Don't look at me, Lieutenant; it wasn't my idea. When I was trying to slap Willie awake, Dr Fell -went past me saying something about Mayor Wagner. Then, when I was crossing the stage, I saw him in the middle of the balcony, about halfway to the front; lighting a cigar. Shall I get him?'

`Get him, Paulson; get him in a hurry. And no rough stuff, you cluck; remember he's a guest. Help him downstairs; try to use the sense God gave you!'

The door banged.

`Yes, Irish,' said Lieutenant Spinelli, `I'm glad you realize - how serious it is. And don't give me any of that no-motive stuff; that's negative, and what I've got is positive. You can't produce one single witness who saw you between the time you left the stage as Mercutio and the time the rehearsal was stopped at eleven-fifteen, let alone for the critical second when the shot was fired and everybody in this theatre heard the cord snap on the bow.'

Anne Winfield, hitherto seated on; a sofa, rose up flaming.

`That's where you're wrong, Lieutenant. I saw him!'

`Now, miss-!'

She was the image of a young, more spiritual Margery Vane. Yet Margery Vane, Knox felt, could never have attained the intensity of this girl.

`You want to know when it was? It was just when we heard that awful noise of the crossbow, though they didn't tell us until afterwards what made the noise. Barry was just coming out of my dressing room, where he'd gone to look for me. I saw him from the stairs.'

Lieutenant Spinelli lowered his head.

`Now, miss, you're a nice little thing; we don't want you mixed up in this, do we?'

`I am mixed up in it!'

`But you've already said-!'

`I said I was in Harry Delevan's dressing room.'

`Wasn't that true?'

`Mostly true. 'Shall I tell you?'

`Yes, I guess you'd better.'

`Well! Barry hadn't been very nice to me yesterday or yesterday evening. And I was out of sorts, what with Margery Vane not being what I'd imagined her, and things taking so long to start and all. We always take it out on the people we're fondest of; I expect I was trying to pay him back a little. Anyway ! Mr Delevan had been very attentive. ..'

`That's the fellow who played Paris?'

`He didn't; play this evening,' said Barry Plunkett. `If you remember, Lieutenant, I threw the rat downstairs and sacked him. We brought in Jack Harding to play Paris, and he did what anybody could with it.'

`You were saying, Miss Winfield?'

`I was saying,' replied Annie Winfield, that Mr Delevan had been very attentive. Last night, in the interval between the second and the third act, he stopped me outside the broom cupboard over there, where they keep mops and things. We stood inside the broom cupboard and talked (yes, the door was closed!), and he asked me to go up to his dressing room at the beginning of the third act, because the two men who shared it wouldn't be there.

`I don't like him much, really. But I said yes, because I was getting back at Barry, though I wish now I hadn't. So I went up there. Well, he kissed me a few more times

`I ought to have cut the swine's heart out,' said Barry Plunkett. `So help me, if he comes near this theatre again ...!'

`You stay out of this, young fellow! Yes, Miss Winfield?'

`But I kept thinking about Barry, and imagining Barry. At last I broke loose from Mr Delevan, and said, "Excuse me", and ran partway down the stairs.

`Barry was just coming out of my dressing room. He had his back to me; he didn't see me at all. I was just going to call out to him, when I heard that whap, that sound everybody heard. I knew something was wrong; you could tell by the voices from the stage that they knew

something was wrong.

`But the voices didn't stop. He went on to his dressing room, and I ran back upstairs. I said, "It's something awful; I don't know what, but it is" And Harry said, "Well, look. If there's any trouble, we'd better say we were together all the time. It's no lie, it's as good as true." So we agreed. And it couldn't have been more than two minutes afterwards that the whole show was stopped, and we learned what had happened. That's all.'

Lieutenant Spinelli considered.

`Now, miss,' he said, `do you really expect me to believe all that?'

`Why not? It's true!'

`How far can you stretch coincidence? At the one critical moment, when a trigger was pulled and a bolt fired, you "just happened" to be looking at your boyfriend from the stairs?'

`I was chasing him, if you must know! I couldn't get him out of my mind! I didn't dream this ridiculous charge would ever be made!'

`Yet you'll admit ...'

`My darling,' said Barry Plunkett, putting, his hand on her shoulder, `be careful of this fellow; he's as tricky as Machiavelli. Don't admit anything!'

`Did you hear me order you to keep out of this?'

`I'll tell her what I like' and when I like. Anne, don't let the damn dago rattle you!'

Lieutenant Spinelli strode forward. `You say one more word . .

`You say one more word, by Christ, and one of us won't leave this' room alive!'

`Now, why is it, young fellow, you must keep losing your temper, that way? I'll do this thing by the book. I will do this thing by the book,' bellowed Lieutenant Spinelli, hurling to the floor with a clang the crossbow-bolt he had still held, `if I'm cut into little pieces and served up at the DA's banquet.

`There were two of you in it, of course; it's the only way to explain the facts. You, miss, went over and tapped at the box door; and spoke

to her so shat she'd get up to open it. Your boyfriend ...'

`Oh, do you really think she'd have opened the door to me? If so, you haven't heard how she went on at me!'

`Haven't I, miss?'

Tears rose to Anne Winfield's eyes.

`I made a dreadful exhibition of myself in front of you all,' she said, `because I hadn't stopped to think. The god of my idolatry was all day. She couldn't bear the thought that a snip like me might succeed as Juliet in the theatre where she failed. It was mostly luck, I know; luck, and Barry as director. But she came here prepared to hate me, I expect.

`And do you imagine I hadn't heard the story about me being her daughter? How it would horrify them in Springfield! I modelled myself on her because of the accident that I look like her. An aunt of mine who saw her in London once said, "Doesn't that girl remind you of Margery Vane?"

After that it was all up. But last night, feeling so miserable because Barry didn't care a scrap for me...'

`My darling,' observed Mr Plunkett, `I am what Lieutenant Spinelli would describe as the worst son

of-a-bitch this side of Port Chester. But I love you very much. I always will.'

`Whatever you are,' said Lieutenant Spinelli, `I know what I think. Give me half a chance, just half a chance, and I'll tag you both with Murder One!'

`Tut!' interposed the voice of Dr Gideon Fell, as Dr Fell threw open the door and towered beaming like the Ghost of Christmas Present. `Shall biological functions be interfered with, and true hearts parted, with any such stony glare as that? Come off it, Lieutenant! Forget Barry Plunkett; he no more committed this murder than you did, - and in your heart you, know it.'

`Have you an alternative to offer, Maestro?'

`I would remind you,' said Dr Fell, `that crime and charity usually begin in the same place.'

`At home? Here in Richbell? Yes, I know; but how does it help us? And I asked if you had an alternative to offer.'

`Well, yes. The time for enlightenment draws near. Finishing touches can be added if I may ask one or two questions of ..'

`Of whom?'

'Of Miss Hamilton here, with your permission and hers.'

Hitherto Kate had contributed nothing to the argument. Now, occupying a throne-like chair, she drew herself up.

`Well, shiver me timbers!' she said, `Is this cross-eyed old ogre turning his glasses on me? We've heard a lot about you, Gargantua: you can look like Old King Cole and act like Jack Ketch. I'm only a little girl from Athens, Georgia; I never meant much harm. But are you a Baptist?'

`No, madam.'

`I've done a lot of things in my time,' said Miss Hamilton. `I've jumped in and out of bed: in the days, that is, when somebody still wanted me to. I once stayed drunk for a week with two men in - a hotel outside Poughkeepsie. Brother, that was something to remember! But there's only one sin on my conscience, one that I can't forget. When poor Marge Vane was brutally murdered, I'd thrown a seven on my first roll and was winning some heavy sugar ...'

'from Lawrence Porter, once of Fer-de-Lance,- Kentucky, whose father is said to own half the state? A venial sin, surely; he could afford it. Besides, on what earth-shaking day does it become news when one Southerner takes another in a crap game?'

`Well'

`My questions, madam, concern the Westchester Players of thirty-seven years ago. How well do you remember those days?'

`Better, in some ways, than a lot that's happened since. What do you want to know?'

'Sherlock Holmes!' pronounced Dr Fell, as though uttering a password; `Some months ago, on shipboard, Miss Vane herself told me that, though Adam Cayley had acquired the rights to William Gillette's play Secret Service, they had no intention of using that gentleman's

most famous vehicle, Sherlock Holmes. In one matter the lady lied so fluently that I wondered about this. Adam Cayley didn't mean to do Sherlock Holmes, then?'

`No, he didn't mean to do it. I never saw the play myself, though Mr Gillette used it at the Criterion for his farewell appearance in '29. In that one they let Holmes get married, which is more than they've had the nerve to do in the current Broadway musical about him. Adam Cayley got an acting copy, and he and Marge read it. They said the woman's part was lousy, the whole play was lousy.'

`Did you read it, Miss Hamilton?'

`A junior member of the company asked to read a play we might do? Knock it off, Gargantua!'

'Then you can't recall the famous scene with the cigar in the Stepney gas chamber?'

`What kind of a gas chamber was it? If you mean cyanide gas, like the death house in California, that's one thing. If you mean ordinary gas of the kind used in stoves, they'd play hell to mess around with cigars. And look, Gargantua! What has Sherlock Holmes, 1899, got to do with Marge getting killed last night?'

`Much, I assure you. Were you well acquainted with the William Estabrook of past years?'

`I knew Will; I, liked him. He was, hitting the bottle even then, but so what?'

`Did you know John Fosdick?'

`Jack Fosdick? His real name was Luther McIlvey; somebody told me he killed himself the other day at a hotel on 43rd Street. Oh, we all knew Jack! Most of us thought he was making up to Marge's sidekick, Bess Harkness, but Marge would have squashed that; she hated his guts. Any

way, Will Estabrook himself had kind of a yen for Marge. And Graham Cunningham...'

`You don't mean Judge Cunningham?'

`He wasn't a judge then, and he didn't have anything to do with our gang except as a spectator. He was Graham Cunningham, a hot-shot

mouthpiece making a fortune out of corporation law; living at Scarsdale and commuting to town; he couldn't have been more than thirty-five. Maybe he had a yen for Marge, maybe he didn't; he was a canny bird, and clammed up. But what's this got to do with the price of eggs?'

`That's what I want to know,' shouted Lieutenant Spinelli, jumping in. `You said it was almost time for enlightenment. Let's have "just a LITTLE enlightenment, then!- The suggestion has been made that this murder was committed by two people working in cahoots, and it makes sense to me. Maestro, is it true?'

`Well, no.'

`You say that as though you hesitated!' Dr Fell reared himself up.

`Then I will say it in another way; and without hesitation, by thunder! This crime, most definitely, was the work of one person and only one. And yet ...?'

`And yet-?'

`The suggestion of two persons, though false,' replied Dr Fell, `is the closest shot that has yet been made at truth. You see, you are forgetting Hans Wagner.'

`I thought it was Mayor Wagner,' cried Anne Winfield. `Please, aren't you forgetting something else?'

`It's a little astonishing, my darling,' said Barry Plunkett, 'to find you posing as a great detective.'

'I'm not posing as a great detective or anything else! I'm not clever; I don't pretend to be. But this Weary Willie! Aren't you accepting him a little too easily as the harmless drunk he says he is? If Margery Vane could cherish a grudge for thirty-seven years, so could somebody else. Couldn't

Willie have committed the murder himself?'

`He could have,' observed Dr Fell. `Do you think he did?'

`Don't look at me!' yelled Lieutenant Spinelli. `I'm going nuts, I tell you; I'm going stark, raving nuts!'

`You see, Anne? Once before you nearly had the lieutenant in a fit.

Draw it mild, my poppet, or they'll be carting him off to the funny house at any minute.'

Kate Hamilton heaved up out of her chair.

`Well,' she said, 'I'm not forgetting Hans Wagner. Or Christy Mathewson, or Ty Cobb, or the whole damn sheebang of the World Series.' But I don't see how it pays to remember 'em either. And I'm worse than the lieutenant. He's only going nuts; I'm already there. Still! This toy clown that whirls over and over on the horizontal bar ...'

`Don't wind him up, Kate!' said Barry Plunkett. (She was already doing so, to the accompaniment of metallic clicks.) `Don't put him down on the table to see him perform! He'll inch towards the edge, and. ..' I

`It's all right, Barry; I'll be careful. Watch him swing: just like you, isn't he? Forget me, Brian Boru. Aren't you and Anne both singing loud hosannahs? If the big shot says you're not guilty, you can go on your way rejoicing with nothing more to worry about. Why aren't you doing it?'

`I don't know, Kate. It's, not the big shot who worries me; it's our Machiavellian friend with the notebook. If he still thinks I dressed up as Hamlet and shot crossbows, it may be Murder One even yet. That's first-degree murder, isn't it?

‘A little charge like that, to top everything else ...'

`Kate,' screamed Anne Winfield, `you put Joey too close to the edge! Don't you see what he's doing? Catch him, can't you?'

Kate made a valiant but ineffectual grab. The mechanism under Joey seemed to gather as though_ for an explosion. He whirled once more, leaped, flew off the table, and smashed in two pieces on linoleum-covered concrete; A strange unaccountable silence held the six persons in the green room. Barry Plunkett sat motionless. Kate Hamilton looked on in consternation. Lieutenant Spinelli lifted a fist. Dr Fell tugged at his bandit's moustache. Anne Winfield, tears in her eyes, ran -over to pick up the pieces and hold them against her heart.

`Well,' said Philip Knox, `who did commit the murder after all?'

Distantly, penetrating his mind for the first, time, the church clock struck two.

TRUTH IN SIGHT?

THE WRIST-WATCH on the bedside table indicated eleven thirty in the morning.

Knox, roused out of sleep by the clamour of the telephone beside his ear, glanced at the watch as he propped himself on one elbow to reach for the-phone with his other hand.

Thus he awoke in his room at the Gramercy House on the morning of Tuesday, April 10th. It was Judy's voice on the wire.

`Morning, Phil! You're up, then?'

'I've just opened my eyes.'

`Well, well! Another 2.30 AM taxi ride from Richbell to New York! In this town you learn to go without sleep; you have to learn it. I was at the office at nine this morning.' `Are you at the office now, Judy?'

`No; I'm at Richbell.'

`Richbell? What are you doing there?'

`It's an assignment for the magazine. The big chief thinks what we need is an article, "Women Look at Crime", that sort of thing, and asked me to do it myself. I'm not the writer you are; I'm not much of a writer at all; but at least I know what our readers want. I must interview several women hereabouts, especially Connie Lafarge.'

`Connie lives at Farleigh, which is several stops away on the New Haven.'

`I know, but she's at the theatre this morning. Phil! Didn't you tell me, in the taxi on the way back, you had a lunch engagement' with your publisher today? And another appointment this afternoon?'

`Yes.'

`This business is going to take all day. Could we possibly meet for dinner at the Lone Tree Tavern in Richbell?'

`With pleasure! Do you know, Judy, that's the first time you've asked me to meet you anywhere?'

`Is it? Maybe I have my reasons. Phil!' There was a slight pause.
`Another thing. It happened Sunday night, not last night, but so much has been piling: up that it rather slipped my mind. Do you remember?'

`Remember what?'

`On Sunday night, after that woman was killed, Jud Lafarge drove Connie home, and then drove all the way back to the theatre to correct an, impression of something he said he'd heard. Only he couldn't have!'

`That's a little scrambled, Judy. Would you mind explaining?'

`Earlier, much earlier, Barry Plunkett had said he didn't exactly say, though he did give the impression that the only way up to the balcony was by the outside stairs from the alley beside the theatre. Jud Lafarge corrected this, and said he'd heard Barry telling us.'

`Well?'

`Jud couldn't have heard it. We were in the auditorium, you know. When Barry said that, the only people present were you and me and Margery Vane and the humorous Mr Plunkett himself. Jud and Connie, who'd been back-stage, turned up immediately afterwards. But how could he have heard?'

`There's not much to it, my dear. Voices carry all over the place in that theatre. When Barry went back to get swords and daggers for our impromptu fencing match, he stopped to talk to Anne Winfield outside the pass door. The rest of us were some way off, and they were speaking in ordinary, tones; but we heard every word they said to each other: The point's not upsetting you, is it?'

`No, no; maybe you're right,' Judy sounded worried. `But it's been on my mind.'

`There's been something on my mind too.' `Oh?'

`You must know one of Lieutenant Spinelli's cops interviewed your boss?'

`Really? Nothing was said against me, I hope?'

`On the contrary, the big chief gave you the highest references. But you first got a job with Her Ladyship in April, 1946, which is six months after you landed in New York. What had you been doing in

the meantime?'

`The Lone Tree Tavern, Phil! Shall we say seven o'clock ?'

`Any time you like. I only wanted to ask-'

`Lone Tree Tavern, seven o'clock!' She rang off.

With no premonition of events rushing fast towards disaster, he shaved, showered, and dressed at leisure. He had lunch with Edward Stevens of Herald & Sons, eating scrambled eggs by way of belated breakfast. Afterwards, at the Public Library, he inspected books, documents, and newspaper files set out for him about the Harry Thaw - Stanford White case of 1906.

It was still early. But, to avoid the early evening commuters' rush at Grand Central, Knox killed time in the Lower Level bookshop, took the 4.25 Stamford Local, and alighted at Richbell shortly before five-fifteen.

It was a day alternately overcast and fine, with rain threats crossing gleams of sun. From the overhead bridge he descended to the waiting room, a dingy place with a lighted ticket, window, high-backed wooden benches, and a newsstand that never seemed to be open. The placard beside the ticket window announced that for the week of April 26th the Margery Vane Players would present Barry Plunkett, Anne Winfield, and Anthony Ferrara in *The Devil's Disciple*, by George Bernard Shaw.

A tall, heavily built, amiable young man, fresh from the ministrations of a barber who had shortened his already short brown hair, pushed open the big door to the station yard and entered with an air somewhat harassed and hurried.

`Aren't you Mr Knox, sir? Remember me? I'm Larry Porter.'

There seemed no special reason why all the goblins should jump back. But they did.

`Yes, I remember you well. How are you?'

`Not so good. I think the fuzz is chasing me, though I don't see why.'

'By the fuzz you mean-?'

`Sherlock Spinelli and his men.'

Mr Porter's candid eyes strayed towards the advertising poster.

`Poor old Marge!' he said. `She's to be shipped back to England and buried with Severn honours in Oxfordshire, as soon as the medical examiner releases her body. I'm going along to help Bess attend to it. Can't do less, can I?'

`No, I suppose not.'

`But, as I say, I think the fuzz is after me. Sherlock gave me a bad time Sunday night and again Monday morning, until my father phoned and straightened things out. Then they let up - until now. This morning they went to the bank in New York and got a copy of her will, though there's nothing about me in it. You see,' he gabbled on, `Marge could never understand how I always had money in my pocket. I didn't want to admit I was still being supported by my old man, so I said it was my skill at bridge and poker. That's a laugh, actually. I'm not a very good bridge player at the best of times, and I can't seem to win a dime at poker. I don't see what's eating the fuzz, I just don't see ... unless it's that damn jewellery? But they must know by this time I didn't take the stuff!'

'Do you mind a question about that?'

`Not from you. What is it?'

`As I understand it, she said she saw you take the collar and the bracelet.'

`Marge lied. She could tell lies with a face like the Soul's Awakening, and probably got into heaven on the strength of 'em.'

`Whereas you, as quoted by Lieutenant Spinelli, say you saw her do the same thing.'

`Just between ourselves, I didn't actually see it; I broke down and told that to Sherlock too. But I knew Marge; I knew her in more ways than one. She was tricky, none trickier. And yet I was fonder of that gal than anybody's ever going to know. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got things, to attend to. Which side is the train for New York?'

Knox pointed. 'Go through that door, along the passage, and up the first stairs, not the far-ones. Would you also mind telling me-?'

`Sorry, sir; got to hustle. Excuse me.'

Away he went. The hands of the clock above the ticket window stood at five-eighteen. There should be a train to New York before the half-hour. Knox turned again towards the door to the station yard, and almost bumped into Lieutenant Spinelli hurrying in.

`This guy Porter. '

`Bound for New York. Are you inclined to stop him?'

`I might be, but I won't. It's not that important. What are you doing here?'

Knox explained. The other's swarthy face wore an odd, strained expression as he listened.

`You're having dinner with Mrs Knox? A little 'early, aren't you?'

`Yes, but I thought I could kill more time here.'

`She's got "women" to interview, has she? You're sure she said "women"?'

`Yes; should she have said men? What difference does it make? And what's the matter with you?'

`I don't like this; I don't like it, at all. Walk along with me.'

`Where are we going?'

`You'll see. We're just about ready to wrap this thing up. And there's some new evidence, whether or not you think it means anything.'

They left the station yard and turned left into Richbell Avenue. Ranked cars were drawn up diagonally at parking meters. All things seem to await the descent of spring twilight; a stroke of sun flashed across the road and was gone.

They passed the Mask Theatre, the drugstore, the jeweller's, an interior decorator's, and the Lone Tree Tavern.

Above the intersection of Richbell Avenue and Elm Street hung a traffic light; posts at the crossing glowed with green neon letters for `Walk' and red for `Don't Walk'. Lieutenant

'Spinelli led Knox: to the north side of Richbell Avenue, and farther east, past more suburban shop-fronts, to a great window of diamond-shaped panes in vari-coloured glass below, the gilt Gothic lettering

John Richbell's Place.

He remembered the Olde Englysshe interior, all dark carved wood, hunting prints, and booths along one side, with the inevitable flavour of whisky and damp. At twofifteen in the morning he and Judy had taken a nightcap there before being escorted out to the taxi by a semi-intoxicated Connie and her totally intoxicated husband.

At the moment John Richbell's Place was deserted except for a dispirited bartender and Dr Gideon Fell, who sat beside a table at the back, a beer in front of him, smoking a large meerschaum pipe. Lieutenant Spinelli made for a telephone at the far end of the bar counter, where he dialled a number and spoke earnestly. But he had the newspaperman's trick of talking so close to the mouthpiece that no word became audible a yard away.

Knox turned to Dr Fell:

'It has been unwise,' proclaimed Dr Fell, 'to visit the theatre this day. They are rehearsing *The Devil's Disciple*, and they are in a state. Mr Plunkett, the son of a Presbyterian minister, portrays that very unconventional Presbyterian minister, Anthony Anderson, in the New Hampshire of 1777. He swore he would play Gentlemanly Johnny Burgoyne, the part of his own choice, until Miss Winfield dissuaded him. And his un-clerical ad libs, which might almost be described as anti-clerical ad libs, must be expunged before they set fire to the scenery.

'Yet there is small cause for the company to feel apprehensive. Have you seen this morning's newspapers?'

'I saw the Herald Tribune. The notice was a rave.'

'So are all the notices. No, there is small cause for apprehension. And we have not yet told them...'

'Told them what?'

With his left hand Dr Fell threw across the table a pair of red dice with white spots, which showed two deuces.

'Little Joe!' he said. 'We- have not yet told them,' he added, 'what I fancy Lieutenant Spinelli is about to tell you.'

The lieutenant, with a grimly purposeful look, put down the telephone and approached the table.

`Now get this! Lady Severn was a very businesslike woman, even when she did an unbusinesslike thing. Her New York bank, I'd better tell you, is the 61st and Park branch of the Gibraltar National.

`During February, when she was in Florida, she made a will. She drew it up through her solicitor in London. When the terms were all set, she had 'em make three copies and send 'em for her signature. She sent one signed copy back to the solicitor, one to her London bank, and one to the 61st and Park branch of the Gibraltar National. I went there myself this morning, and read it. Here are the terms.'

Out came the notebook.

`She had no living relative, There's a small legacy for Elizabeth Harkness, not enough to excite cupidity, "together with my scrapbooks containing theatrical notices, which Bess has always desired to have." There are some still smaller bequests to servants who've been with her for years, and also to some charities.

`But the rest of the entire estate - and it's a damn big one, even when you allow for taxes - is left. `Yes? To whom?'

`"To my beloved company of players, who have chosen to call themselves the Margery Vane Players, under the capable financial direction of Mr Judson Lafarge and the inspired artistic direction of Mr Barry Plunkett. I further direct that a suitable sum shall be set aside by these two last-named gentlemen, and administered at their discretion, for the founding and maintenance of an academy of acting, similar to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, which shall be known as the Margery Vane Academy, that my name may be perpetuated beyond the term of this poor clay."

`Now, how do you like that?' demanded Lieutenant Spinelli. `How do you separate the good from the bad, the bitchiness from the real generosity, in this woman or any other woman?'

`There's something else, isn't there?' asked Knox. - `And something on your mind?'

`There was something on my mind. I thought to myself: is this on the level? It's a hell of a lot of scratch to toss around just like that.'

`Well?'

`The name and address of the London solicitor were on the will. I expected it to be one of those fancy names we always hear about. You know, like "Cadwallader, Blip, Hogwash, and Cadwallader." But it

wasn't. It was just Parker and Parker, 4 Gray's Inn Square. I thought I'd be justified in a trans-Atlantic phone call.

`OK! Dr Fell and I made the call from White Plains at noon. which is five in London. We got one of the Parkers, an old guy who couldn't stop talking.'

'And?'

`Mr Knox, that will be strictly on the up-and-up. It's just as loose and help yourself as that. But it'll be probated, the lawyer said - he used a fancier term than just `probated' - because there's nobody to contest it.'

Lieutenant Spinelli's expression changed a little.

`That figures,' he added. `Now we'd better tell the maestro what you're doing here.'

And it was Spinelli who did so. Dr Fell made no comment. He finished his beer and went on puffing at the meerschaum pipe. But he looked so grave that sudden uneasiness struck Knox like a dart in a board.

`You asked me,' said the lieutenant, `whether I was tailing Larry Porter. I wasn't; I could have used a word with him, that's all. But there is, somebody who's being very carefully tailed and watched, to make sure there's no more trouble.'

`The murderer?'

`The murderer,' -assented Dr Fell. `As you may have gathered, the police are almost ready to close in. Mr Spinelli and I have worked it out together.'

"Together", Maestro? What do you call together?'

`Tut!' said Dr Fell. `Stop the bus! Stop it at once! At our lunch conference, before I had uttered one word of explanation, you suddenly saw the whole thing.'

'I saw some of it, yes, when I remembered the fellow's height and interpreted that point about crime and charity. Then, when you went on to tell me everything, it all seemed so damn plain I could have kicked myself for being so long about catching on.'

`Being so long? Once more,' said Dr Fell, expelling smoke, `I must

call for an arrest of the bus. The murder was committed at not quite eleven-fifteen on Sunday night. It is now not quite six o'clock on Tuesday. If that strikes you as being reprehensible delay, your notion of speed must be a curious one. And what do we do now?'

`We wait. We can't do anything else. Whether there's enough evidence ..'

Briefly, a dying sun ran its beam down Richbell Avenue before being swallowed in cloud. Across the faces of Dr Fell and Lieutenant Spinelli the great window of so many vari-hued panes threw colours of gold, red, orange, blue, and green. A darkish figure, more than vaguely familiar, was striding past outside. The figure, smoking a cigarette, stopped, veered towards the window, pressed nose to glass, and peered in despite' the opaqueness of the panes.

Then the cigarette was flipped away. Into John Richbell's Place, shoulders high, stalked Barry Plunkett, hatless as usual, in sweater and slacks, He marched straight up to Lieutenant Spinelli.

`What's going on in this town now?' he asked. `Kate Hamilton has disappeared.

'DISAPPEARED? What do you mean, disappeared?' `What do you usually mean when you say it? I mean she's not here.'

`Sir,' interposed Dr Fell, `no doubt the lieutenant's question (harrumph) had reference to what might be called the quality of the disappearance. Was it in any way strange or unusual? Even sinister?'

Barry Plunkett thrust one hand into his pocket and lifted the other for gesture.

`In the sense that every bloody thing is beginning to seem sinister, yes! The call this morning-'

`Rehearsal, you mean?'

`Yes. The call was for ten o'clock. Kate plays the wicked old Puritan mother. She's all over, the place in the first act, and isn't seen afterwards. But Kate's, a friendly soul. Even when she's got nothing to do, she loves to hang about and talk and get in your way.

`Right! We ran through the first act pretty smoothly. The rest of it's dodgier - lot of supers in this one, and business you've got to play carefully to kill any possible laughs. We went on to the second act.

When I dismissed 'em for a bite to eat at half past twelve, telling 'em to come back at one-thirty, Kate was there, talking twenty to the dozen.

`And she was back again at one-thirty, still talking. It wasn't so easy this afternoon. The scene at the minister's house was all right - I'm the lousy minister, and Anne's my wife - but they kept messing up; the court scene that follows. Anne, after persuading me not to be General Burgoyne, was still at me to switch parts AGAIN and play Dick Dudgeon. I spoke very gently to her. I said, "Sweetheart, get the hell out of this or I'll tan your behind." Also there was a bloody reporter wanting to question everybody about the murder. Anything he'd write would be the worst kind of publicity for us, but you can't throw the press out on the seat of the pants.'

`Oh, ah!' said Dr Fell, puffing great smoke clouds. `We appreciate your difficulties and your tact, but what of Miss Hamilton?'

`That's what I'm trying to explain. When you get used to seeing somebody always sitting in the same place, waiting for people like a spider - well, you get used to it. It comes as a shock when suddenly you see she's gone. At about a quarter past five I said, "Where's Kate?" But nobody knew.

`I don't know why I bothered; she hadn't been needed since morning; maybe I'm not quite so unruffled as I must usually seem. Toby at the stage door said she'd had a' phone call at five. Not another soul had seen her; it was like a vanishing trick. Kate lives at the Admiral Coligny Hotel in New Rochelle; I thought of phoning there, but why should I? It doesn't matter where she is; she can be meeting a boyfriend at the parish house of the Episcopal Church or anywhere else, provided only she turns up for the show tonight. But I wished I knew.

`At half past five I said, "Oh, to hell with this, good people; that's enough for one day. Clear out now, but mind you come back sober for Romeo and Juliet." Do you follow me so far, Dr Fell?'

`Perfectly.'

`Right! Away they went, the happy urchins, released and singing. Then it occurred to me that once or twice I might have spoken to Anne more sharply than was necessary. But I couldn't find my beloved strumpet either. Out I went for a quick one at the Lone Tree. I was in the bar, taking consolation on the rocks, when I looked out of the

window and saw Anne on the other side of the street, legging it east along Richbell Avenue. Out I went after her. I crossed the road to this side, passed the pub here, saw you people, and here I am. I can't stop now, I'm afraid; I'm still in pursuit of Anne, and she can't have got far. All the same,' and he looked at Knox, 'I've got something to tell you.'

A grey bus lumbered past in the avenue. Knox, who had been brooding, jumped as though stung. 'To tell me? What is it?'

'When I first went into the Lone Tree, the bloke who acts as head waiter on the restaurant side came up to me and said, "Are you by any chance Mr Philip Knox?" I declined the honour, but said I knew you. "If you see him," he said, "will you let him know I've got a message from his wife?" I asked this bloke what the message was, but he wouldn't tell me.'

Knox rose from his chair.

'With all due respect to the John Richbell of 1661,' he

said, 'I am making for the Lone Tree' in some haste.' 'I think I'll go too,' said Lieutenant Spinelli.

'The idea,' observed Dr Fell, 'appears a sound one.'

'As for me,' pronounced Barry Plunkett, 'I am off after my airy sprite as usual. What a dance the little tramp does lead me, et ego in sede beatorum! Cheer-ho.'

'This guff of yours, Irish,' said the lieutenant, 'may mean something, or it may not. We'll keep it in mind, just in case

'What's the hurry, Mr Knox?'

'I said haste; I meant haste.'

Knox dashed into the street. He would have dashed over the road, despite fairly brisk traffic, if Spinelli's yell had not warned him to walk farther west and use the proper crossing. Though he did this decorously enough, he had no sooner crossed the intersection of Elm Street with Richbell Avenue than he plunged into the central passage at the Lone Tree Tavern. The head waiter of the restaurant side, a sharp-nosed young man in a lounge suit, stepped out as though to bar his way.

'My name is Knox. I believe you have a message for me from my

wife?'

`Got any identification, sir?'

`Listen, why so much caginess? What's the message?'

`You'd be surprised,' groaned the young man, `the things you can get bawled out for in this job. Be a pal, sir: got some identification?'

`Here's my driver's licence; will that do?'

`Does your wife have an English accent?'

'She should have; that's her nationality. What's the message?'

`Mrs Knox phoned at half past five. She says she's sorry; she'll be detained, and can't make it. But she says it's all right; she says to go on and have dinner without her. Dinner's on at six; care to order something?'

`Frankly, I'm not hungry.' Knox turned to Lieutenant Spinelli and Dr Fell, who had followed him in. `A drink, however ...'

`That,' said Dr Fell, leading the way into the front bar at the opposite side of the passage, `is a most commendable idea.'

The front bar lay swept and burnished. The screen in the window through which Mayor Jenkins' friend had been thrown was now repaired or replaced. They approached the bar counter, watching their images spring up in the mirror behind it. The fat bartender drifted over.

`And this old duffer,' added Dr' Fell, `must insist on being host. What's yours, my dear fellow?'

`Beer, thanks. Always beer.'

`Lieutenant?'

`It oughtn't to be anything; I'm on duty. But beer will suit me fine.'

`And for me too, I think,' said Dr Fell.

The bartender, drawing' beers, grew almost affable. `Howdy, Lieutenant! Looks like clouding up for rain,

don't it?'

`Hi, Steve, You never can tell, can you? Mind if I use your phone?'

`Not a bit, Lieutenant. Help yourself.'

The phone here was also at the far end of the bar. Lieu tenant Spinelli picked it up, - dialled, spoke ventriloquially, and returned. They had scarcely raised their glasses to drink when, in a kind of whirlwind, the front door banged and Barry Plunkett was with them again.

`Now Anne's gone,' he said. `Disappeared, clean off the pavement at six o'clock in the afternoon! Unless the sorcerers - are at their vanishing games in old Richbell, there's only one thing that can have happened.'

`Yes, young fellow?'

`Lieutenant, you saw a number, eight bus head, east along Richbell Avenue just before I left the other-pub?- Anne must have taken it. The bus starts at Mamaroneck, and goes on through Richbell to Harrison and Rye, stopping only at Dreamland Amusement Park on the way. Dreamland opened today, or so they tell me; I can't see why the devil Anne should be going there, but then I can't see why she should be going to Harrison or Rye either! Unless we're all bewitched ... !'

'Gently!' boomed Dr Fell. `Gently, sir, and control yourself. What will you have?'

`Before a show? Nothing, O sage!'

`Nothing at all?'

`Gallons when the curtain's down; not one thimbleful before then. You don't have to be drunk, you understand. It needs only a short one to throw your timing off; the best man can blow a whole scene and blow the play too.

'But whom have we here?' demanded Barry Plunkett, peering out of the window. `Whom have we here, approaching this sink of vice where Quakers run riot and all but castrate the mayor? Whom have we entering upon us? And what grouse, Father Jud,' he added a moment later, `today weighs down that noble heart and doth compress earth's vanities to nothingness?'

`You can say that again,' declared Judson Lafarge; mopping his forehead with a handkerchief. 'It's hell, Barry, it's plain hell. Some

people - what do they call 'em? - say that in this life we're put back on earth to suffer for all the dirty tricks we played in a previous existence. If that's so, in my previous existence I must have been the one stinking son-of-a-bitch of all time. You know what?'

`No, Father Jud, I don't know what; I was asking the reason for this state. Has Weary Willie let you down after you acted the Good Samaritan?'

`No, Willie's all right. Judge Cunningham and I bought him some new clothes at the men's shop; he's sworn to keep sober, or at least fairly sober; and we'll find him some work if he really means he wants work.'

`Then what is it?'

`It's Connie!' she's disappeared! She bugs me some of the time and drives me nuts the rest of it; when I'm depressed I've often pictured my life as a carefree widower; but I wouldn't lose the damp woman for all the gold in Fort Knox. Where is she?'

'Good! 'exclaimed Barry Plunkett. `I beg your pardon, Father Jud. I didn't mean it's good Connie has disappeared. I mean: come and join the club! Welcome! That's three of 'em: stolen by sorcerers, though any sorcerer crazy enough to steal Kate Hamilton must have escaped from a wizards' loony-bin at the very start of his career. Three, I say!'

'Only three?' repeated Knox. `Let's hope ...'

And then the telephone rang.

The fat bartender- edged along behind the counter, listened briefly, and held out the phone.

`For you, Lieutenant!'

It seemed almost inevitable. Knox followed Lieutenant Spinelli as the latter went to take over. In the gloom of the front bar it seemed to him that the lieutenant's face grew more strained as Spinelli replaced the phone on its cradle.

`Are you going to tell me,' Knox asked, `what I'm afraid you're going to tell me?'

`About your wife?'

`Yes.'

`If you mean, has she disappeared too, the answer is - lord, no!' Lieutenant Spinelli spoke with false heartiness. `Wait, though! In common honesty, whatever else happens, there is something about Mrs Knox I'd better tell you.'

`Well?'

`She's at the home of she's at - anyway, at this minute she's with the murderer, or the one we're pretty sure is the murderer. That story she told you about interviews was only cover for ...'

`For what? Good God, man! If Judy's in some kind of danger, did you let her walk into it?' `She's in no danger at ally'

'No?'

`No! I've got two men of mine watching everything. There's another one too - he's, from Richbell, actually - getting his first chance at plain-clothes work even if he muffs it. I don't count on him, but I do count on my own two men. They'll step in at the slightest sign of funny business, and no fooling around; if it's necessary, they've got orders to shoot.'

`But, Lieutenant-!'

'Easy, Mr Knox! You were steady enough Sunday night, when you had to be; don't let it get you down now.'

He turned away towards the other end of the counter, Knox following. The bartender had just put a whisky sour in front of Judson Lafarge.

`Touch of hangover this morning,' said Mr Lafarge, lifting the glass. `This'll fix me up. What were you saying, Barry?'

`Kate Hamilton disappeared from the theatre. My Anne vanished smack in the middle of the street. How did Connie depart this world?'

`Don't talk that way!'

`Sorry, Father Jud. I mean: what happened?'

`How do I know? Connie was at the theatre this morning, talking to Judy Knox; you must have seen her. We both went home to lunch. I had to go out afterwards; when I got back the maid said she'd had a

phone call about five-thirty. She went out, taking her own car, and didn't say where she was going. Have they all gone to the same place, do you think?'

`Father Jud, may my soul be damned if I can even make a guess! I'd better get something to eat, I suppose. The house is sold out tonight, and sold out for three months hence. Excuse me.'

Barry Plunkett stamped across to the restaurant side, presently stamped back munching a cold roast beef sandwich, and finally drifted, away towards the theatre. Judson Lafarge finished his whisky sour and drifted away too.

Lieutenant Spinelli, Dr Fell, and Knox were left alone in the darkening bar as time ticked by. The street lamps flashed on in Richbell Avenue. A brush of lightning touched the sky. Knox's appetite, already negligible, dwindled to something like nausea at the thought of food. His efforts to extract information grew frantic but met with no success.

`Lieutenant, who is this fellow we're after? Who is the murderer?'

`You've been using your head well enough, when you showed Luther McIlvey must have been John Fosdick; use it again!'

`Well, whose house is Judy at?'

`Did I say she was at somebody's house? It's true the Maestro and I didn't mention every last bit of the evidence; he didn't even call my attention to that cut in the lining of the coat; but ... What's the matter, Maestro?'

Dr Fell, pipe in one hand and glass in the other, had been peering out of the window.

`We have another visitor,' he said.

Judge Graham Cunningham, derby-hatted, a wing collar and grey tie setting off short dark coat and striped trousers, entered the Lone Tree Tavern with a light raincoat over his arm, and faced them in the bar.

`Thank you, gentlemen, I will drink nothing. A light dinner at home, and then I think - I say I think; I have not yet made up my mind - I shall attend Romeo and Juliet tonight. By the way, what ails poor Lafarge now? He seemed much exercised about the presumed

disappearance of three ladies.'

'Actually, judge, there are four,' Knox began. 'You see...'

'Sir,' interrupted Dr Fell, 'the subject of the feminine in general, as others have remarked before me, is too vast and complicated for discussion now. Have you been developing any more theories concerning collaborators in murder?'

'I stand by those already outlined, sir, until I hear them denied or corrected. And yet was I perhaps too hasty? Mistaken in judgement? I am not a young man. It may be, as the younger generation forever insists,' that les grandperes ont toujours tort.'

'Les grandperes ont toujours peur,' said Dr Fell. 'I am and have, by thunder!'

'Something tells me, sir, that you and the lieutenant are reluctant to discuss almost anything. Am I correct, sir?'

'You are correct, sir. We merely wait.'

'Ah, indeed. In that case,' remarked Judge Cunningham, 'I will disturb you no longer. I look forward to this evening, gentlemen. And so, with your permission, good day.'

Time crawled on. The twilight thickened; the dim lights were switched on in the bar; thunder rumbled low along the sky. Knox could eat nothing; now he could drink nothing either.

'Look here!' he burst out' at last. 'If you won't put a poor devil out of his misery by saying or doing anything, at least answer me this. The murderer: is it somebody we've seen and talked to, a good deal?'

'It is someone,' replied Dr Fell, 'who has talked most confoundedly to us. Talked and talked and talked and talked!'

'Is it somebody who has been under any strong suspicion?'

'That depends, of course, on your definition of "suspicion". I should say yes. Last night Mr Spinelli would have said no.'

Then, with shattering effect on nerves, the telephone rang again. The bartender did not even move towards it. Lieutenant Spinelli snatched up the instrument.

'All right!' they heard him say after a pause. 'We'll be there before

you are. Make it the Crazy House. Everybody's thereabouts, I'd guess. See you, Jacobs.'

And he put down the phone.

'Yes,' yelled Knox, 'everybody's in the crazy house and likely to stay there. What's up?'

'Our quarry went away for a little while, but came back soon. All right! My car's outside. It's a Mustang hardtop; I got it for Flo; a woman can handle 'em without any trouble, in spite of the, power they've got; and now she complains I'm the only one who uses it. But we can just cram Dr Fell into the back.'

'We can cram Dr Fell into the back for what?'

'For where we're. going. Our quarry and Mrs Knox are on their way to the amusement park. I don't know why it has to be Dreamland; it's a hell of a place for a showdown; but that's where we're headed in a hurry.'

19 MASK REMOVED

SKEINS OF coloured electric bulbs, alternating in red and white and blue, had been festooned, high above a central place in the amusement: park whose notice-board described it as, All-America Square. Dr Fell in black cloak and shovelhat stumped into it on his crutch-headed stick, with Spinelli and Knot, both hatless, at either side of him.

There had been no trouble about parking the car. The crowd, at no time dense because this was Tuesday night, had begun to scatter and scamper under the threatening sky.

Some distance ahead, as they entered All-America Square, loomed a Ferris wheel's towering shape and the Alpine slopes of a roller-coaster called the Whirlwind. Between these, north-east, a white corkscrew lightning bolt stabbed down the sky; you could barely count three-before the shock of the thunder. But not a drop of rain had fallen.

At one side of the square the thumping music of a merry-go-round seemed to rise and fall like the painted wooden animals on its platform. Along a second side stretched stands for the sale of hot dogs, candy floss, ice-cream, and soft drinks. The third side offered games of chance, you threw wooden rings or bet on revolving wheels to win dubious prizes hung up at the back. But the fourth side, facing the

newcomers as they entered, formed All-America Square's great lures for idlers.

At one end of this side they saw the would-be ghostly premises of the Old Haunted Mill, flanked by something called 'Indian Territory'. The opposite end of the same side was occupied by 'San Francisco Earthquake'; they never learned what went on there; and by Neptune's Aquarium. In the middle of these four displays rose a square white building with barber-pole pillars at the entrance below the straggling red, white, and blue letters Crazy House.

Shouts issued from the Crazy House; shouts, and feminine squeals. Lieutenant Spinelli led the way towards it.

'We're not going through the place,' he explained. 'Do you know what's inside?'

'I can guess,' replied Knox.

'First there's a lobby with distorting mirrors. From there you go into the main body of the house over a kind of bridge. As you cross the bridge there's a huge blast of air to send skirts ballooning up.'

'Do they still play that delicate joke,' asked Dr Fell, 'in spring of the current year? It was considered a capital jest in 1893; perhaps it had point at least as late as the nineteen-twenties. Today, with so many women in jeans or slacks, the joke loses something of its hilarity. This way?'

'Yes. Don't offer to pay any' money; I'll flash my badge and it will get us all in. We're not going through it, as I say. Wait in the lobby, Maestro! I don't want to get hung up, in case I have to go into action all of a sudden.'

'Into action?' demanded Knox. 'What kind of action?'

'You'll see - I think. Up these steps, now; past the man with the papier-mache head.'

A still thinner crowd, mainly of very young people, scattered and scampered before the assault of the thunder. But Dreamland ground on as usual. The lights of the Ferris wheel commenced to revolve on the night sky. Across merry-go-round music cut the roar of a diving roller-coaster, trailing yells as the cars plunged.

In the middle of the square, looking round casually, stood a figure

that seemed familiar. Then Knox recognized Officer Paulson in plain clothes.

`Evening, Lieutenant. Evening, gents.' Paulson spoke out of the side of his mouth. `You may see some people you recognize around here. But, except for Weary Willie in person, they're all dames.'

'Never mind the dames! Seen anything of Jacobs or Clifford ?'

`No, Lieutenant; they're not here yet. Going into the Crazy House?'

`Only as far as the lobby. Now shut up and keep your eye peeled.'

`O K, sir. I think

`Don't think,' just do it!'

Then, past shrouding curtains, the three of them penetrated into a somewhat cramped hall where panels of crooked looking glasses under dim lights gave back their reflections in fluid shapes of nightmare.

There were other people somewhere in the Crazy House; distantly, to an accompaniment of muffled voices, they could, bear movement and faint crashes. But nobody else entered afterwards; they had the lobby of mirrors to themselves.

`May I remark,' observed Dr Fell, puffing out his cheeks, `that to me this form of diversion, considered purely as amusement, has always seemed rather less than side-splitting? My corporeal shape (to say nothing of the face) is already a monstrosity in no need of distorting mirrors to stop clocks and frighten little children. I start with much too unfair an advantage.'

Lieutenant Spinelli became brisk. `All right, Maestro! Let's have it.'

`Let's have what?'

`We've worked out everything in this business except the part played by Mrs Knox. What was she, up to? What did Lady Severn have against her?'

`I don't know,' returned; Dr Fell. `I have already informed you that I don't know and can hazard no guess. However! Since we have determined that the part she played was an innocent one, does the answer really matter?'

`Maybe not, no. But, just keeping the record straight-! And, speaking of keeping the record straight,. we never did iron out the details of the prelude. I mean what happened on shipboard in January. John; Fosdick, or Luther McIlvey, was up to some funny business on that liner. He let off a revolver: without meaning to hit anybody, you say.. But what was it all about?'

`Sir,' proclaimed Dr Fell, `Margery Vane is dead; John Fosdick is dead. Whatever we decide must remain the merest conjecture.'

'OK, ' Maestro.' Conjecture away! Let's clean up what we can.'

'Concerning the affair on shipboard, gentlemen, the only important point is Miss Vane's state of mind. That state of mind led to her, murder under different circumstances more than three months later.; We saw the. state of mind take form and harden before our eyes.' Dr Fell looked at Knox. `You were there; you remember?'

Knox remembered.

No longer did he see distorting mirrors, or hear merry-goround music and the roar of a diving roller-coaster. Briefly, in imagination, he was with R M S Illyria. He saw the smoking room and the sports lounge; - he heard wind whistle, felt the deck pitch underfoot, and saw the vivid face of Margery Vane.

`Her state of mind had already disturbed me,' said Dr Fell, `as I think I indicated at the time. She entered the smoking room, very slightly dishevelled from the wind on deck, and announced that she had seen a ghost. When I asked whose ghost, she at first attempted to turn off the question with no answer at all.

`Later, when I pressed her in the sports lounge, she said the ghost had been Adam Cayley's. She told us she thought she had seen him standing by the companionway to the boat deck, wearing the old plaid cap he used to wear; not speaking, but stretching out his hand as though to touch her.

`I could not believe this, as my questions must, have shown. To this lady Adam Cayley was a memory too tenuous, too nearly forgotten, for his appearance to have upset her even in a dream. Something else was on her mind, something more immediate and pressing, striking a fire of emotion whenever the image recurred to her.

`Who or what had she seen, if anything at all? A possible clue had already been provided when young Porter, either by accident or

design, brought up the name of John Fosdick and asked what became of him. This suggestion she rejected; she flung it away with 'such violence' as to rouse suspicion in the dulllest mind,

But what actually did she say? "Really, I have no recollection of any such person." Those were her precise words. "Or, if he ever existed, he got only what he deserved and will go on deserving." And will go on deserving: there is the operative clause.

`It now seems certain, as has been suggested, she learned from a Riviera friend named Sandy Mactavish that John Fosdick was alive and would seek a position with the new company of players. Well, she was determined to forestall him. Whatever its original cause, thirty-seven years had not altered or weakened her hatred.

`Reading between; the lines, we see this clearly in her outburst just before the firing of the shot. "I'll fix his wagon for him too; this time I'll fix it good and proper!" '

`But what about Fosdick himself?' asked Knox.

`Fosdick was aboard, and in tourist class. She did not know this; she did not spot him when she saw the present day Fosdick old and shrunken and ailing, in the ship's dining room. Since he was travelling under his real name of Luther McIlvey, a name she had never known, she lacked any clue to identify him. But at this late date, aided by a certain newspaper item in the World-Telegram for April 13th, we can hazard a guess as to what Margery Vane must have seen on a windswept deck that night in January. Yes?'

`In the newspaper story,' Knox said excitedly, `there was mention that among the possessions left by Fosdick, after he killed himself with sleeping pills, - the police found a very lifelike head-and-face mask of a much younger man. Do you mean it was his own face as he must have looked in 1928? And that he deliberately put it on and showed himself to her that night?'

`I say only,' answered Dr Fell, `that this is most probable.'

`But why did he do that? Did, he hope to appeal to her? If so, why fire the shot?'

`It is unfortunate,' said Dr Fell, `that we 'have learned (and, by the nature of things, can learn) so little about the character of this man who in despair took his own life before the middle of April.

`Miss Kate Hamilton has assured me privately that as a young man he had enormous charm. Was it only the ephemeral charm of youth, disappearing later, or did he carry some of it to the end of his life? Talent he undoubtedly had. But he seems always to have been a fumbling, indecisive sort of person, glib-tongued and willing to better himself by any means, yet forever taking the way of least resistance, even to the bitter and eventual door of suicide.

`Let us reconstruct that night of the wind and the sleet. Margery Vane did not know he was aboard. But he must well have known she was aboard; the whole ship knew it.

`Why did he have the mask at all, and why did he put it on to show himself? Did I mention conjecture - and wild conjecture at that?

`But he had the mask; he put it on. What did the lady herself think, when she saw that living ghost out of the past standing by a companionway and looking at her with eyes she remembered only too well? Did she really imagine she must have dreamed it, as afterwards she swore? Or had she sensed all along the hovering presence of the person she most hated on this earth? How bitter, then, when the purser's bloodhounds bayed on the trail of this image, and the image did not seem to be there at all!

`Perhaps he meant his appearance in the mask to appeal to her; perhaps the appeal contained something of a threat. Assuredly the firing of the shot was meant as a threat.

`He had a revolver; 'he fired through the glass' panel of the door; he threw the weapon overboard soon afterwards.

`Bear in mind, please, that he had not meant to hit anyone. From his passport, retained by the New York police following his death and examined by Lieutenant Spinelli at my request, we know his height to have been exactly five feet eight inches. A man of, that size cannot possibly fire with accuracy through; a panel six feet above the deck. One of the ship's officers saw him immediately afterwards; he had not been standing on anything - a wooden box or the like - to give him added height.

`All he could have seen of the sports lounge, say by jumping into the air to look through was one glimpse of a group sitting at a table, on the port-side platform. This man, remember, was already almost at the end of his tether. In the confusion of his mixed motives and fears he loosed a wild shot away from that group at the table, missing by

yards. - It was the explosion of the bomb that had burst in his own brain. He flung the pistol overboard, and fled away to his own quarters.'

Lieutenant Spinelli grunted.

'He may have done all that, maybe,' the lieutenant snapped. 'But he wasn't very consistent, was he?'

'Oh, consistency?' roared Dr Fell.

Lifting his crutch-headed stick, so that a grotesque image of his back rose up weirdly in the mirror behind him, he stared and glowered.

'Do you look for consistency, sir, in the sort of character we have been discussing? By thunder, do you look for strict consistency in anybody? Even in Margery Vane, who could be as weak as water with Lawrence Porter but as inflexible as steel towards John Fosdick?' Only one person in this affair has been entirely consistent, as we shall see before we have finished. That person is the murderer.'

'And the murderer,' demanded Knox, 'is with Judy at this very minute?'

'Yes, I fear so. You see-'

One of the entrance doors was pushed open. A hand threw aside the curtain shrouding it. Into the lobby of mirrors shouldered a burly, hard-jawed young man in the plainest of plain clothes, with a soft hat pulled over one eye. He straightened up as Lieutenant Spinelli faced him. 'Yes, Jacobs?'

'They're here, Lieutenant. They're making for the Old Haunted Mill.'

'And going into the damn place?'

'I dunno, sir; I'd guess so. Clifford's got 'em covered. It's funny about that mill.'

'Funny?'

'I know Kim O'Brien, the fellow who runs the exhibit. It runs on water; water flows along a kind of tin channel and carries the little boats through the caverns with the skeletons and whatnot. Well, the authorities have been raising hell about the water shortage both in New York and here. So Kim O'Brien hired a couple of tank-trucks he

used a hose as a siphon and piped in enough sea water from the Sound to fill both trucks. He uses sea water for the mill, the same water all the time. But the mechanism that controls the flow of water has a habit of sticking and leaving the boats stranded inside, even though it's legal to use sea water for. ..'

`Never mind what's legal' or what's not legal. Jacobs, you dumb cluck, did you let those two go into a dark honky-tonk that's the very place for another murder?'

`Hell, Lieutenant, somebody had to come and tell you!'

'I've been told. Let's go!'

And Lieutenant Spinelli plunged out, with - the others following.

One single hard scurry of rain had lashed All-America Square, sweeping, it clean of nearly every person except Officer Paulson. But no more rain followed. Only a tumbled and lightning-torn sky, with thunder booming in pursuit, pressed down on nerves and amusement park as Spinelli raced along the side of the square towards the Old Haunted' Mill. Jacobs and Knox were at his elbow; Dr Fell had been left far behind.

The front of the mill, all brown-painted gable ends and blind windows, displayed a low dark archway into which stretched a dark channel of water. The water did not move. Neither did two little empty boats, each with seats for six persons sitting two abreast, which lay in the channel under open air.

Behind the little grill of a ticket window on the right sat a grizzled middle-aged man in overalls. In front of the exhibit, with the air of one about to begin a solo dance, stood another burly young man who might have been. Jacobs' twin brother except that he was of fair complexion and Jacobs dark. This particular officer, undoubtedly Clifford, pointed to the motionless water and addressed Lieutenant Spinelli.

`It's stuck!' he said: `They went in there, but the thing's stuck!'

The lieutenant was not impressed. `And you let 'em go in, for crissake?'

`You' said to wait for instructions, sir! ' The last thing you said was to wait for instructions!'

`So you let 'em go in, and you didn't even follow?'

'It's all right; I'll follow now.'

The grizzled man in overalls bounced out of his cage.

`Now just a minute, there" he yelled. `You hold your horses, both of you, till you know what you're doing!'

`Lieutenant,' said the panting Jacobs, `this is Kim O'Brien, who runs the place. He'll tell you-'

`I don't get it,' Mr O'Brien shouted. `How there could be any harm in them two: it beats me and they're the only ones inside. Anyway, there's no need to jump in the water and wade through; it's up to your knees. I can show-you a quicker way, and you won't even get wet.'

`Then show us,' snarled Lieutenant Spinelli, motioning Knox to stay beside him. `Clifford, you and Jacobs wait here. I'll handle this myself. God help me, if anything's happened in there I'll, .Come on, Pop; show us!'

Now it was: the man in overalls who ran. Spinelli and Knox ran, after him, round the left side of the Old Haunted Mill. Their guide stopped at a closed door, about halfway along this side.

`In here,' he said, opening the door. `As soon as you get well inside the place, there's a kind of a catwalk that runs beside the channel. It winds some, but there's room to walk single file. In here; turn, to the left; you'll soon come to the place where the boat must be stuck. If you're a copy, all right! But what is this? What's happening?'

Lieutenant Spinelli paid no attention. A white wink of lightning opened and shut as he dodged inside. Knox followed, closing the door.

The tunnel inside, though damp, was not quite dark. If the mechanism controlling the flow of water had ceased to work, this could not be said of other automatic devices. A screech of metallic laughter rang through the cavern; an electrically illuminated devil-face swooped at them and then vanished.

The walk for those behind the scenes, a platform some, eighteen inches wide, ran two feet above the water level of the channel. Other little boats, spaced about a dozen or fifteen feet apart, lay marooned in this channel. But all the boats were empty.

Nor did they see any sign of human life. At intervals along the walls, both at left and right in the tunnel, dimly lighted apertures opened to show what were meant for little rooms inside the mill. From one of these a skeleton rushed out at them and rushed back again. More metallic laughter screeched in their ears. In one of the wall openings so realistic-looking a dummy lay on the floor to represent a dead man that briefly Carlo Spinelli hesitated. He did not hesitate thereafter.

Leading the way almost at a run, he slid his right hand under his coat towards the left armpit. It emerged holding the short-barrelled police-positive revolver.

`Faster!' he said. `Faster, and make all, the noise you like! But don't talk; we've got no time to talk. If this place really did happen to be a haunted mill, I know whose ghost we'd be seeing.'

`Whose?'

`John Fosdick's. Or Luther McIlvey's, or whatever he called himself. He's been chasing us all through this case, and we're not through with him yet. But I said not to talk, didn't I? This is the damndest place that ... Oh, no, you don't!'

The last words were not addressed to Knox. They had pounded round a curve of the tunnel, and into a straight stretch. Ahead, on the left, opened a rather larger `room' with its floor only a foot above water level. In the background, slowly turning, could be seen the outline of what might have been a big mill wheel. In the foreground were two living figures.

Certainly one of them was alive, the other perhaps only inert and unconscious. Judy, Knox lay sprawled face upwards on a straw-scattered floor, her eyes closed and her face a waxen pallor. Kneeling above Judy, back turned towards the newcomers, someone else had just lifted a sharpened, four-pointed crossbow-bolt to strike down and stab. Knox could not see the would-be murderer's face but he knew who it was.

`Drop that!' bellowed Lieutenant Spinelli. `Drop that, you hear, or-!'

The murderer, past all reason or reasoning with, lifted the bolt higher. Lieutenant Spinelli fired.

Even the report of the police-positive, shattering in that confined space, was drowned by an enormous crash of thunder which exploded close and split in tumbling echoes down the sky.

The iron bolt fell clattering on boards. The impact of the bullet, striking under the left shoulder-blade, flung Lieutenant Spinelli's quarry face forwards and sideways across Judy's feet, to lie with body still on the boards, but with shoulders well over the edge and head and arms in the water.

`You see to your wife,' the detective said. `There's nothing I can do for the other one.'

And there was not. A close-fitting hat had come loose in sea water. A pair of spectacles drifted down and disappeared. From the wound in the back crawled a little sluggish blood. Elizabeth Harkness had been shot through the heart.

20

JOURNEY'S END

SUNDAY EVENING, April 25th. Late Sunday evening, and the stage of the Mask Theatre set for the New Hampshire farmhouse kitchen in the first act of *The Devil's Disciple*, which would open the following night. A certain group of persons, under strong lights, had assembled on that stage for the last act of an unofficial play.

Dr Gideon Fell, communing with his meerschaum pipe, was piled on the sofa called for in the stage directions. Philip and Judy Knox occupied round-backed-chairs, part of the same set. An unwontedly subdued Barry Plunkett and a more than timorous Anne Winfield were perched-side by side on the edge of the table pushed out from the dummy fireplace. Lieutenant Spinelli would not sit down anywhere; he paced about the stage, occasionally wheeling to fire question or remark.

`What threw me off at the start,' he now declared, `was a misunderstanding. I thought the maestro said no woman had committed this. crime.'

`Your pardon, sir,' Dr Fell observed with polished courtesy. `You said you would give odds no woman fired that crossbow. I replied that I agreed without a struggle. The point, of course, is that no crossbow was used as a weapon.'

`But we heard the damn thing!' exclaimed Barry Plunkett.

`The trigger was pulled and, the cord released, perhaps half a minute after the actual murder. That formed a part of the ingenious

misdirection, as I shall try to explain. If we are to understand Margery Vane's murder, ladies' and gentlemen, the thing we must grasp is that no crossbow was used as a weapon or under the circumstances could possibly have been used.'

`Why not?'

Dr Fell puffed at the dead pipe.

`Judge Cunningham, I; understand, gave two of you a little lecture on crossbows. It is surprising that he himself did not see the flaw in the evidence, since he seems to have stressed a crossbow's murderous hitting power.'

`You, Lieutenant, skated dangerously close to the truth when you said no murderer could have slipped into the box to fire at Margery Vane behind her back; at such short range, you pointed out, it would have made a worse mess than anything seen since the D-Day invasion landings in '44. Had it been discharged from across the theatre - a longer distance, but still short range - the mess it made of the victim's body would have been almost as bad. Most of you saw what happened when Mr Plunkett stood on the stage here and fired upwards at the door of Box C. The bolt penetrated half its own length through a solid oak door.'

`Are you saying;' demanded the actor, lifting his fist, `the bolt was used as a as a kind of hand weapon?'

`Not necessarily,' replied Dr Fell, `though it depends on what you mean by a hand weapon. That also I shall try to explain. The crime was committed in this particular way, I once remarked, because it was the only way this particular murderer could have committed it.

'This particular murderer.' Anne Winfield shivered. `Elizabeth Harkness! But she seemed so - so sympathetic!'

`And so, in most respects, she was. Her lifelong devotion to Margery Vane, though for her own purposes she exaggerated- it in the telling, was no sham or pretence. If Margery Vane had been content to let sleeping wraths lie, her follower would have done the same. In what has been called the prelude, aboard the liner, I could have sworn no evil emanations issued from Miss Harkness. Arid I was right; she had not yet made up her mind. She lost control, in her tight little soul she went berserk, only when Margery Vane's long-cherished hatred for John Fosdick came into sharp conflict with Elizabeth Harkness's long-cherished love for him'

`Then Kate Hamilton's story was true?' cried Anne Winfield. `That in the old days Fosdick made a play for Bess? And she responded only too much: is that it?'

`Miss Winfield, may I beg you not to anticipate the evidence?'

`Oh, I'm so sorry.! But ... your suspicions of her-?'

`The suspicions even of this old scatterbrain,' grunted Dr Fell, `became strongly, roused when upstairs in the office on Sunday night she sat before us and rattled out a story which was (harrumph) far too good to be true. One small point had bothered me even before then. It inspired my somewhat misunderstood statement that crime and charity usually begin in the same place.'

`At home,' said Lieutenant Spinelli. `And I thought you meant Richbell, or I thought so at first.'

`Come, sir! Many persons might consider Richbell as home, or at least as a home-from-home. But it could never have been so considered by Margery Vane, the crime's victim and the only victim we have. Her home might have been London, or Somerset, or Cannes, or in latter months Florida. It was wherever she stayed with her entourage, notably the never-absent Elizabeth Harkness.

`The point which bothered me, I repeat, was a small one. Early Sunday evening Miss Vane, with Elizabeth Harkness and Lawrence Porter, arrived at the Pershing Hotel in White Plains. Soon afterwards two articles of jewellery, a diamond bracelet and a gold diamond and emerald collar, were stolen from her bedroom. Have you by any chance got those articles now, Lieutenant?'

`In my pocket, Maestro. Want 'em?'

`Not now, thank you; I shall want them presently.' Dr Fell continued to puff at the dead pipe. `Margery Vane swore Porter had stolen them; she said she had seen him do it. With equal decisiveness Porter swore the same thing about her, though he later confessed he had not actually seen it done. What if the same were true of Miss Vane's story? Each accused the other so violently because each thought the other was the only person who could have done it. But there was one other person - and only one - with ready access to those jewels. Because both knew the faithful companion would never have taken such things for profit, it occurred to neither to suspect her. I fear it occurred to me.

`Then came the faithful companion's story in the office of this theatre, and the mysterious press cutting by which we could identify Luther McIlvey as John Fosdick.

`Ladies and gentlemen, it was an even more curious story than it seemed!

`Now we had the press cutting; there it was. Margery Vane certainly had seen that same press cutting, since Miss Harkness referred to it in her employer's presence. But what proof had we that somebody here in Richbell had cut that item out of the newspaper, put it into an envelope, and sent it air-mail to Florida?'

`By that time,' replied Lieutenant Spinelli, 'only one woman's unsupported word. She said Lady Severn must have kept the envelope it came in, because Lady Severn kept everything. You asked me to look for the envelope among her belongings at the hotel; I looked for it, but I couldn't find it.'

`Elizabeth Harkness was clever, you know; Miss Vane once commented on the fact that Bess could always think of a plan. But she also said Bess could never be tough, in which she was mightily mistaken. Elizabeth Harkness always told as much truth as she dared or as could be proved. She even admitted she received the New York newspapers wherever she went. She could have cut that item from a paper delivered to her in Miami, and shown it to her employer as though it had come anonymously by post. And the very odd story with which she regaled us ...'

`Granted, since we know these things are true!' said Philip Knox, 'But what was so very odd about her story?'

`Well, consider!' Dr Fell frowned hideously. 'By her own admission she knew Fosdick was travelling tourist class in Illyria. She worked out, by the same evidence we ourselves used, it must have been Fosdick who fired that wild shot through the glass panel. Yet she didn't tell this to Margery Vane! And we can be sure she didn't, else Miss Vane would have been quick to use it as another weapon against the enemy. John Fosdick may or may not have been the lady's enemy, but Margery Vane thought of him as that. Had her Bess's devotion been the unqualified devotion Bess swore it was, surely she would have mentioned these discoveries? But she didn't. Why?

`Our daring Bess - who, though under pardonably great strain on Sunday night, several times repeated her story and only once gave

even the slightest hint of breaking down - our daring Bess began to appear in a light stranger still. Years ago, she said, she had only the slightest acquaintance with John Fosdick; she hardly knew him at all. Yet, in her amplified story, Fosdick was all over the place. Sympathy for Fosdick oozed through every word. She even told us the man's exact height, five feet eight inches, as Lieutenant Spinelli verified from his passport. If Fosdick had never held the least place in her life, if emotionally this now-dead actor meant nothing to her, how were we to account for all this?'

`Kate Hamilton - yes, Miss Winfield! - Kate Hamilton supplied the clue on the following night. Kate Hamilton, the sole remaining survivor of the, original Westchester Players, was the only one who could have supplied it.

`What were the relations, in those far-off days, between a young actor of quote "enormous charm" and this repressed, apparently colourless young woman, a year or two older than Margery, Vane, who craved attention but never received it?

`Did he seduce her? Or was it only an impassioned Victorian idyll of the nineteen-twenties? Whichever it was - again we must indulge conjecture - we shall be safe in saying she never forgot him. She did not meet him during those ensuing years; the alert Margery would have seen to that; but she never forgot him; either. Put, an image like that into the mind and heart of such -a woman as she was and she will cherish it unto death. Here, regrettably,- I myself am anticipating the evidence. But it will help us understand the sequence of events.

`What did she feel, aboard Illyria, when she saw the John Fosdick of the present day: weary and aged and ill, dragging his bones back to New York in the last hope of a job Such a woman would not turn away from him; I think she would cherish him all the more. She must have guessed in New York, if she had not guessed earlier, that the implacable. Margery would spike Fosdick's guns by preventing him from getting work with the new company. Mr Barry Plunkett, who turns a hard face to the world and is in truth as softhearted as anyone you can name, might still have defied Mighty Margery and given the poor devil a job. But Judson Lafarge's business acumen stopped this too. Fosdick had been finally dished.

`There was nothing, Elizabeth Harkness could do about this. There was nothing, that is, until in April she opened her New York newspaper and saw an obscure item: John Fosdick, in a shabby hotel room, had taken the suicide's way out.

`Forty years devotion to your patroness form a habit not lightly broken. But still less easily torn from the heart are the roots of a great love this woman has now magnified out of all proportion. Margery Vane has done her last bit of mischief. Margery Vane is going to die. And yet, by thunder, Elizabeth Harkness still had the nerve to sit upstairs in that office and tell us the tale of sorrow she did tell us!'

`When you had your eye on her all the time?' asked Knox. `Dr Fell,' that's the oddest part of all. When she told that story, I could have sworn you were honestly moved.'

Dr Fell's face- had become fiery.

`And so I was!' he said. `I was moved by tragic irony: that what she claimed to be the hand of devotion was also the hand that struck down. Or perhaps, if you insist on a shade of truth, I felt some pity too. Ladies and gentlemen, never kill the man (or woman) you think has wronged you; afterwards you may need him (or her) for moral support. No, the good, Bess's story was not all acting. And she had, as murderers often have, some right on her side.

`Mr Plunkett is not alone in being soft-hearted. I might have been inclined to close my eyes to the evidence, and let Elizabeth Harkness go as I have let other offenders go, if, after forcing a certain woman to corroborate her alibi, she had not turned on that same woman and again tried viciously to kill. For already, as she told her story in the office...'

Throughout this recital Judy Knox had not spoken a word. She sat quietly enough in the round-backed chair, but with a look of fright that would not be dispelled. Now she sprang to her feet.

`I don't think I care to listen to this part,' she said. `In fact, I can't listen to it! Will you excuse me, please? And don't follow me, Phil; it's not necessary. I will wait for you in the foyer.'

`The unnecessary thing, Mrs Knox,' Dr Fell told her heavily, `is for you yourself to leave us. What you did was done under duress; it could not be helped. Accept my assurance, and Lieutenant Spinelli's, that you have nothing whatever to fear:'

`Oh, don't you see -that's got nothing to do with it? The murder, that is? What I can't bear is the other thing you'll tell them. I'll wait in the foyer, Phil. But, when you've heard the other thing, you won't want me to wait.'

`Madam, madam, I don't understand you. I have no other thing to tell them that concerns you. What Miss Vane held against you is no affair of mine; in any case, it is past and done with. Accept my assurance-'

Judy would not listen.

`You won't want me to wait,' she cried, `and you won't want me either! Goodbye, Phil.'

Away she ran, heels rapping, across the stage and down the concrete corridor to the pass door. Once more Lieutenant Spinelli wheeled round.

`All this,' he roared, `isn't getting us any place at all! Sit down, Mr Knox! Sit down, Dr Fell! There, that's better. Now, Maestro, you were saying. ..?'

Dr Fell sighed gustily.

`I was saying that already, as Elizabeth Harkness told her story in the office, there had dawned over these dull wits some notion of how the murder might have been committed. Subsequent mention of Hans Wagner made me sure.'

`Yes, Maestro, so we've gathered. But will you tell us just what the hell an old-time ball-player has to do with this business ?'

`Was he an old-time ball-player?' inquired Dr Fell. `I have heard several persons (as Judge Cunningham would say) so testify, though I can't swear to it from my own knowledge. On my sole visit to a baseball park, many years ago when the Brooklyn Dodgers really were at Brooklyn and not at Los Angeles, I gained only a confused impression that Brooklyn itself was holy ground which an outlander might asperse at his peril.

`Again, I fear,' continued Dr Fell, pointing with the dead pipe, `a remark of mine has been somewhat misconstrued. Hans Wagner was not only the name of a noted shortstop or doorstop or whatever the term may be. It is also the name of the night watchman at this theatre: a singularly inefficient watchman, it seems. He was told to keep a sharp eye out for Weary Willie in the balcony, and failed to do so. To me "Hans Wagner" suggested the balcony, or, to be specific and avoid further, misunderstandings, the balcony level. That is the real explanation of the mystery.'

`Now is it, bejassus?' asked Barry Plunkett. `Better get on and tell us, O sage. Anne here is getting ants in her pants by this time. You wouldn't think the little scut could be so interested in murder, now would you?'

`I'm not interested in murder, you silly! I'm only interested in-'

`Yes, I know; but it wouldn't be good manners to get down to business here and now. Wait until later tonight, can't you.'

Will you two SHUT up?' bawled Lieutenant Spinelli. `Now, then, Maestro?'

`It will help, I think,' said Dr Fell, `immediately and briefly, to clear away the extraneous dead wood which has confused some minds in this affair. I mean, of course, the story told by Mr William Estabrook, alias Weary Willie, of a masked marksman in black, who fired a crossbow from one side of the stage before sinking to limbo through a trap door.

`There was not one word of truth in that story. Believing I knew what had really happened, I could be sure there was no truth in it. But why did he tell the story? In the hope, by his own confession, of being received back into the theatre with which he once was associated. And was he daft to tell so wild a tale? No, by thunder! For his hope succeeded. There - are many soft hearts hereabouts, I am happy to say Mr Judson Lafarge, the loud-voiced gentleman who raves at all expense, should join that same club. So should Judge Cunningham. They clothed Willie, they fed him, they supplied him with money to get drunk on. Should anyone feel impelled to give three cheers for Richbell and Westchester County, I can join in with right good will.

`Having determined. what did not happen here last Sunday night, let us go on to the pertinent question of what did happen. Why Margery Vane elected to fly north on Sunday last - whether from sudden impulse or because she had planned it all along, though I incline to the latter view is of no consequence. But of very great importance are the movements of Elizabeth Harkness, who entered this theatre before dinner on Sunday evening with the essentials of a scheme already devised.

`The essentials, I suggest, had been devised before she left Florida. Since there had been extensive correspondence between Margery Vane and Mr Plunkett, he may well have written Miss Vane about the smallish crossbow and two sharpened bolts on display in the foyer.'

`I did,' groaned Barry Plunkett. `So Bess knew it too?'

`Of course; as usual. Now let us try a little experiment.'

Heaving himself up from the sofa, Dr Fell blinked out over the auditorium. Once more the tall red curtains had been drawn wide open, and only a few house lights were on.

`Lieutenant, you have the jewelled collar and bracelet. May I have them now? And the newspaper cutting as well, if you have that too?'

`O K, Maestro! Shall I put the dipping between 'em, and wind the bracelet around the collar, as they were when I found 'em on the floor?'

Dr Fell nodded. The jewelled articles were fastened, together, making a neat little glittering bundle.

`Now the crossbow-bolt, Lieutenant? The one almost used against Mrs Knox. on Tuesday night?'

The stage had been set in more senses than one. Shooing Anne Winfield and Barry Plunkett off the table, Lieutenant Spinelli opened its drawer and took out the iron bolt with its heavy head and four sharpened points.

Dr Fell put down his crutch-headed stick and dropped the dead pipe into his pocket. With jewellery in one hand and bolt in the other, he lumbered out on the concrete apron of the stage.

`Officer Paulson!' he called.

`Here, Doc!' said a voice close at hand.

Nobody had yet observed Paulson, still in plain clothes, sitting in an orchestra seat only a few rows back.

`Mr Paulson, earlier this evening I gave you certain instructions. Have you got a crossbow - any crossbow?'

`Got it here, Doc,' replied Paulson, holding one up. `This One's bigger'n the one we thought did the dirty work,, which was only eighteen inches wide in the head and less 'n two feet long. But she's all wound up, which ain't easy. She'll do, won't she?'

"She will do," said Dr Fell. First he threw the crossbow-bolt and then the jewellery, which Paulson caught neatly. `Go to the place I told

you. Then, at my signal from here, execute the movements and let these good people see. Thank you,'

Paulson strode up the aisle towards the swing door at the rear. Dr Fell turned back to the others.

`Following dinner at the Lone Tree Tavern,' he continued, `Miss Vane and Elizabeth, Harkness and Lawrence Porter returned here. You did not immediately see Porter. For that matter, you did not immediately see Miss Harkness either. Margery Vane entered at the end of a brief fencing match. After an appreciable interval, she called out for her faithful companion, who appeared only then. Do you recall how the faithful companion was dressed?

`Though I did not see her until later, I will tell you. She wore a close-fitting hat; the only woman present to wear a hat in the evening, as she ;had been aboard the liner. Over her arm, on a wooden coat-hanger as usual, she carried Margery Vane's impressive mink coat.

`She had not strayed away more than a minute or two behind her employer. But, during that interval when she was entirely alone in the foyer, she employed the time ... to do what?'

`To pick up and hide the bow and. the two bolts?' demanded Knox.

`Bullseye!' said Dr. Fell. `The bolts are quite short; they would fit easily into the coat's deep inside pocket. As for the bow, we know its size; it was light-, it had a sharp little hook on the stock for convenience in hanging it up. It was hung, this time, to the lining inside the coat. With the coat folded to conceal the bow over Elizabeth Harkness's arm, this paragon of nerve-in-a-pinch held it hidden under the very eyes of her victim.

`At the beginning of the dress rehearsal Philip Knox saw that coat open.-Sitting, down in the front row of the dress circle, she had spread the coat on its hanger over the back of the adjoining seat. But by that time she had pushed the crossbow out of sight under another seat. Later that night, when Lieutenant Spinelli first questioned our atavar of vengeance, I myself caught a glimpse of the open coat. Though the bow had been disposed of, I saw the small rip in the lining where it had been hung.

`Lieutenant Spinelli has accused me of concealing evidence because I did not immediately tell all of you about the rip in the lining. --He is right, but so be it! That minute tear added only one more indication to the other indications, and I was not yet ready for disclosure.

`However, let us continue. When Elizabeth Harkness sat down in the front row of the dress circle, immediately she did something else under the eyes of everybody. She did this and, apparently, went on doing it. Well, what was it she did?

'She lit a cigarette!' exclaimed Knox. `The woman was virtually a chain-smoker. And she had a trick of holding the cigarette absolutely motionless, as I'd already noticed aboard Illyria. After the rehearsal had begun, and I went over with the idea of speaking to Judy, I was drawn there by the glow of Bess Harkness's eternal cigarette.'

`But you did not go near them afterwards, I think? Nor did anybody else. By that time the presence of Elizabeth Harkness and Judy Knox had become too well established. Miss Harkness's cigarette, or at least a cigarette, continued to glow. Now tell me does this suggest any incident in a stage play of ancient vintage?'

Then it flashed across Knox's wits.

`The play Sherlock Holmes!' he said. `And Holmes's adventure in the Stepney gas chamber!'

'How so?'

`Holmes has been trapped there by Professor Moriarty. The lights go out. You think you see Holmes holding a lighted cigar. When the lights go on again, the glowing cigar has been left behind on a high window ledge; Holmes is gone. But I was fooled in this theatre too! I never thought-'

`That it was Elizabeth Harkness's alibi, inspired from a play read many years ago by Margery Vane and, of course, by herself? Bullseye again!

`But I will here suggest,' pursued Dr Fell, making a still more hideous face, `that in her original plan she never meant to provide an alibi for herself. As Margery Vane's most loyal and devoted friend, she might well think herself safe from suspicion; and so, in general, she was. But your wife, my dear fellow, blundered into the middle of the pattern. Elizabeth Harkness, being a genius at improvisation, instantly seized the circumstance and used it for all it was worth.

`In Box C, then, Margery Vane pitched into Judy Knox. Let me not ask the cause of this. Yet it started a panic which could scarcely be said to end even with the death of the victim. Mrs Knox, terrified, fled from the box and sought refuge with the (sympathetic) Miss Harkness.

`For she was sympathetic, you know; everyone has commented on this. I have intimated that she used threats to hold the frightened Mrs Knox at her side and testify that she, Elizabeth Harkness never once left her seat. But, Mrs Knox not being present now, I venture to suggest that the threats were of so veiled and (shall we say) kindly a sort as to be almost unrecognized as threats by the half-demented woman on whom they were used. Though a sympathetic Miss Harkness did indeed leave her seat - having business of her own in semi darkness - Judy Knox may never have totally suspected her of being a murderer until she threw the mask off on Tuesday night.,

'My, dear fellow, the angel of vengeance persuaded your wife to do something else besides attest her alibi. During the brief time Miss Harkness was absent from her seat at the beginning of the third act, she persuaded (or forced; use what term seems apt) a terrified woman to sit holding one of the cigarettes quite motionless until the chain-smoker returned to claim it. Can we wonder that Mrs Knox afterwards had small taste for tobacco, and flew out at her husband merely because he offered her a cigarette?

`What did the guilty woman do during that interval?

`She had beside her a heavy mink coat which, set upright like a seated woman in her own chair, may seem the shape of a seated woman to any glance from far away. At the top of this coat projected up the metal hook of a wooden coat-hanger on which she draped her own small hat. It was not intended as a doll or dummy to deceive eyesight; not - for a moment would it have imposed on anyone who ventured near. But nobody did venture near; nobody had reason to.

`In her own dark coat, carrying the crossbow and one sharpened bolt and the intertwined pieces of jewellery with the newspaper cutting between them, she slipped away into near-darkness. Let us see what she did.'

Once more Dr Fell lumbered out on the stage. This time he turned his gaze to the left.

`Mr Paulson!' he called.

The voice boomed back. Every eye on the stage instantly and instinctively went to Box C, its curved plush-padded ledge some fifteen to twenty feet above the carpeted aisle - below, where little lights shone at the seat edges.

But Paulson was not in Box C Then Knox saw him: he was leaning

over the ledge of Box D, at balcony level some fifteen to twenty feet directly above the corresponding Box C underneath it.

`The time,' continued Dr Fell, `is very slightly earlier than the time we have been accustomed to set for the murder. Romeo is not fighting Tybalt. No; Tybalt is fighting Mercutio, a really spectacular swordsman, in a fast bout towards the right of the stage as you face it or to the left from where I stand now. What would Margery Vane have been doing during that bout?

`She was fascinated by fencing'. She herself once told us how she watched Sir Laurence Olivier, then Mr Laurence Olivier, play Richard III at the New Theatre in 1944 At the climax of the play, a sensational sword-fight between King Richard and Henry of Lancaster, she said that she all but pitched headlong from the box.'

As Tybalt fights Mercutio here, we may be sure, she is leaning forwards, from a rather high chair - as we know - over a rather low ledge - as we also know. Her exposed back, to some degree at least, will form a target to anyone above her. If a murderer in Box D merely holds out an iron crossbow-bolt and lets it fall, the weight of the bolt's head will ensure that it drops straight. Though it will not strike with the crushing power of a fired missile, it will strike more than hard enough to kill.

`But the murderer, Elizabeth Harkness, must make certain, of her victim's position. She cannot be sure the fascination of the duel will make Margery Vane lean far enough out of the box to present a certain target. And there is only one way of being sure. That is your cue, Paulson: now!'

From Box D something flashed, fell, and lay glittering in a heap on the red carpet below both boxes.

`Two heavy and costly trinkets, abstracted from Margery Vane's jewel-box. They flash past her head and, lie there in the aisle below. They are hers; she knows it; she is startled, fascinated, perhaps enraged too. She bends forward to look, as she is certain to do; she bends still further forwards, back tilted out and down, and at that moment ... Come, Paulson: the kill!'

Something else flashed as Paulson dropped the iron bolt. - Straight as a plummet it fell past the ledge of Box C, thudded, and stuck upright in the aisle.

`Isay to

you,' boomed Dr. Fell, 'that no neater murder trap was ever devised. The bolt has entered the victim's back at a slight angle; not because it was fired from below or fired at any angle, but because the back was bent forward when the bolt fell straight. Elizabeth Harkness has done her work. Caught between two heavy trinkets somebody else will be supposed to have stolen is an inoffensive-looking press cutting which, properly interpreted, gives the whole reason for this crime. But nobody will interpret it; nobody can interpret it; the woman thinks herself safe. Like most murderers, she could not resist one gesture.' Here Dr Fell broke off. 'Do you hear me, Mr Paulson?'

'I hear you, Doc.'

'The last move of the murderer's plan we are going to time. Go through the motions I indicated earlier; you may make haste, but there is no need to run. Supposing she has just dropped the bolt and killed her victim, 'begin when I say "now". One, two, three, now!'

Paulson slid back out of sight. Knox kept his eyes fixed on the second-hand of his wrist-watch. Lieutenant Spinelli was doing the same. Dr; Fell had drawn out a pocket-watch as massive as a paperweight.

'Box D,' he said, 'is too high up for us to watch the door open and close. In imagination, at least, you can see him go down the little stairs behind the box, as he went up them a few moments ago. From balcony level he is now at dress circle level. Observe! He emerges from the box enclosure. As he walks well up towards the back of the dress circle and crosses over to the other side, he is using a handkerchief to wipe possible fingerprints from the crossbow.

'It was dark then; it is fairly light now; still observe him. He is in the side aisle of the dress circle, making for Box A.'

Briefly Knox looked up from the speeding second-hand of the watch. Paulson appeared in Box A, making a last artistic flourish of the handkerchief to erase fingerprints.

'Only twenty-three seconds so far!' Knox announced.

'Check!' said Lieutenant Spinelli.

'On the stage,' said Dr Fell, 'a stabbed Mercutio has been supported off. Benvolio returns. Tybalt returns, and is challenged by Romeo. Their own fight erupts in more or less the same place, as we ourselves executed the same dance on Monday night. The contestants wheel and

slash at an increasing tempo. Steady! We have nearly come to the place where-'

Dr Fell stopped. Once more they heard the vicious snap of a cord released on a crossbow. Once more, briefly, Knox glanced up. Officer Paulson, his fingers protected by the handkerchief, rather gingerly threw the crossbow over the ledge of Box A.

'The slight thud as it landed on the carpet below,' pursued Dr Fell, 'last Sunday night was masked by music which masked other noises. Paulson retreats; he is out of the box and out of the enclosure too. From there to the front row of the dress circle is no very great distance.' Dr Fell waited. 'Come! He has returned to the seat once occupied by Elizabeth Harkness. The deed of darkness has been done and covered, the misdirection all arranged. Will someone please give me the timing?'

'From the moment you said "now" to the moment Paulson

was back at the seat she occupied,' returned Knox, 'I make it twenty-nine seconds. Just under half a minute in all.' 'Check!' said Lieutenant Spinelli.

'Twenty-nine seconds,' repeated Dr Fell. 'People will over-estimate time, won't they? Twenty-nine seconds ! Yet not one innocent soul - including Mrs Knox herself, I would wager - saw it happen or had the least idea what happened. Ladies and gentlemen, that is the end. It is all that need be told about the murder in Box C.'

'But it's not the end of the story, surely?' asked Knox. 'My dear fellow, it is very nearly the end. What Elizabeth Harkness did in public you know; we all know. Regarding what she did in private, for some of this you must ask your wife; the rest is not hard to conjecture.

'This iron-willed woman herself became infected by the panic in Box C. Your wife knew too much; and though no doubt Queen Bess still tried to convince an unwilling accomplice of her serene innocence, she feared Mrs Knox had guessed everything and would go to the police - as, eventually, she would have.

'Therefore she had to die. And an opportunity was provided. Your wife went to interview her, among others, for a magazine article. Elizabeth Harkness had almost, but not - quite, flung all caution to the winds. She believed she just might get away with it, provided she committed this murder in the scurry and confusion of an amusement park, and also provided she arranged a sketchy kind of cover there

too.'

`Cover? What cover?'

`My dear Knox, who do you think made anonymous telephone calls to every woman who could be reached - Kate Hamilton, Anne Winfield, Constance Lafarge - telling each woman, afire with curiosity, that each could learn the solution of the mystery, if she hung somewhere about All-America Square at Dreamland between the hours of five-thirty and seven-thirty? Miss Winfield and Miss Hamilton are good troupers; they went, but returned in good time to the theatre. I am told that only Mrs Lafarge waited until the end.'

`It very nearly was the end, wasn't it? Elizabeth Harkness made those phone calls too? But what did the crazy woman think she was doing? She didn't want witnesses, did she?'

`Witnesses? Archons of Athens, no! She wanted suspects. Afterwards it would; be known that Mrs Knox had been seen in the company of a woman. But testimony at such times and places is always inaccurate and unreliable. She hoped, by providing a crowd to choose from, that she could not be identified afterwards.

`She had become half mad, I grant you. She took your wife to the park in a taxi; the driver would have remembered her anywhere. But she still had one of the two sharpened bolts she had stolen. If Lieutenant Spinelli had not arrived in tune ...'

`It had to be done, Mr Knox,' said the lieutenant. `You see that, don't you?'

`Yes, I see.' Knox looked at him bitterly. `I see you deliberately endangered Judy's life. You hadn't enough jury evidence without another attack or near-attack, so we just about had another murder; to cheer us up.'

`In my job,' said Lieutenant Spinelli, - `there are lots of things we don't like doing. The maestro didn't like this; he didn't like it at all; he tried to stop me, but I overruled him. If a thing's got to be done, I do it. Now look here!' he added, his voice rising. `Your wife could have landed in plenty of trouble for what she did, whether she did it; innocently or not. We think we're being pretty big about this, to let her off without any more trouble. And there won't be any more trouble; I have the DA's word for that. The thing's finished, the case is closed. Why don't you go out and tell her that, even if you won't say a word of gratitude? Go out and tell her, can't you,' he yelled, `and get;

the hell off my back?'

This time it was Knox who almost ran. Personal aches are not soothed or hurts assuaged by the solution of somebody else's problem. His own problem remained what it had been - or worse. In the gloom of the foyer, its pink and white illuminated only by the lighted portrait, he found a trembling Judy and an atmosphere that boded ill.

'Yes, I heard Dr Fell!' she cried. 'I pushed the swing door open; I heard every word he spoke. And he was right. I didn't suspect that awful woman of being the murderer. I didn't suspect her even when she crept away and I sat there holding her accursed cigarette.

'She said she knew all about me, but that it didn't matter. She said there was somebody who might try to kill Miss Vane, and that she would try to prevent it; only later she said she couldn't prevent it, but would just watch for the murderer to make a mistake. I didn't suspect her even when I went to interview her at the hotel in White Plains. Then at last she began talking so queerly and wildly that even a numskull would have wondered. When she invited me to go to the amusement park, "to see something of a life she hadn't seen in many years", I didn't like it, but I went. I'm stronger than she was, or I thought I was; I believed I could handle her. How could I know she'd knock me out with the head of that iron bolt, and drag me out of the boat up on the platform...'

Judy faltered and stopped. He gripped her shoulders hard.

'My dear, what is all this? She said she knew all about you, but it didn't matter?'

'Yes! They didn't tell you, did they? But I'll tell you!'

'Tell me what?'

'It oughtn't to bother me, not after twenty years. But it does, it always has! Phil, when we first met in that restaurant just less than a week ago, you said afterwards I looked scared. Well, I was: horribly scared!'

'Of what?'

'For fear you'd learn. And then there's another thing. When we were living together, all those years ago,' you would never let me spend one-penny of my own: you hated the idea. I lied! I let you go on thinking I had quite a little money behind me. And I hadn't; I had

almost none. Then, when I was stranded in New York

`Judy, will you try to make sense?'

`All right! Then you can march me out of the theatre and kick me into the gutter. Do you remember what Anne Winfield said when' she was so upset late Sunday night? She said she was trying to get back at Barry Plunkett through other men?'

`Yes; well?'

`Well, that's what I was trying to do to you, when I first left you. And do you remember what Anne said she thought of becoming, just to spite him? Everybody thought it was very funny and ridiculous, didn't they?'

`Judy ...'

`Well, that's what I actually was, and not a very good-class one. I was only a first name, Dorothy, because it was a name I'd never been called, and the telephone number of ... oh, what difference does it make?

'I did meet Lady Severn on that awful crossing in '45; and we did quarrel about nothing at all. Then, a month and a half later in New York, she saw me with one of her men friends

I don't mean boyfriends, just another man of her acquaintance coming out of my apartment in a place where I couldn't have been anything except what I was. She didn't say anything. But she made inquiries, and remembered.

`It's not much of a life; I wish they wouldn't glamorize it. And it's not what you have to do either; that's the least of it; that's nothing. If I told you everything' the whole business entailed, which I have no intention of doing, you'd feel even sicker than you must be feeling now. It's not an easy thing to get out of, you know. Sometimes you can't get out; it means your death.

`Well, I did get out, being the beast and bitch I undoubtedly am, and not really caring what happened. I got a job with the magazine; I'm there today. And I didn't want to come back from San Francisco; even after all those years I was afraid somebody might recognize me. Then you, seeing you in that restaurant! What's the matter, Phil? If you don't want to hit me, what is the answer?'

`The answer, Judy, is that I don't give a damn.'

`About me?'

`About anything or anybody except you.'

'Oh, if you're being nice to me-!'

`I am not being nice to you; I am stating a simple fact. When this old carcase is fifty-four, nearly fifty-five, you've brought back dreams of what might be or still could be. And yet, since you're intent to avoid me whenever I let you ...'

'Avoid you? Oh, Phil, if I hadn't wanted to be with you all of the time, do you think I would have been with you any of the time? Sometimes I've wondered if it might work ...'

'It would work, my dear. It will work. Shall we try?' `Yes! Yes, darling, let's try! And it won't be like the other time,, will it?'

`No, it will not. If you could only refrain from these incessant wisecracks on the most unsuitable occasions ...'

`Wisecracks? Me? But you're the one forever at wisecracks, which are all the worse because you're a clever monster and some of the digs are almost witty. By the way, Phil, how did you get on with Nell Wentworth? Or that stripper of yours from the Windmill?'

`Dolores Datchett, Judy, was not a stripper from the Windmill. As I have told you before-'

A heavy truck, rumbling, past in the Sunday-night silence of Richbell Avenue, drowned out the rest of the words.